# The MIDDLE COURSE

Mrs. POULTNEY BIGELOW

dlp
40

*"'Have you ever studied palmistry?' asked Althea."*

# The Middle Course

BY

MRS. POULTNEY BIGELOW

ILLUSTRATED BY C. B. CURRIER

1903
The Smart Set Publishing Co.
NEW YORK LONDON

# THE MIDDLE COURSE

## CHAPTER I

### MARITAL MATTERS

MANY dramas, both tragedies and comedies, begin at a dinner table, though they seldom end there, unless one of the principal actors be choked by a fish-bone or die of a "surfeit," like one of England's early kings.

There was, however, no hint of anything dramatic at the hospitable board of Mrs. Bertram Vincent on a certain evening in early June. The light of the candles fell pinkly on eight well-contented, gently-



2134275

pleased faces ; four women and four men sat eating an exquisite meal and absorbing unconsciously the beauty of the scarlet and pink Shirley poppies, of the convolutions of rosy silk and of the unique pieces of silver that enhanced the purity of their spotless damask background. It was a gathering very representative of a certain section of London society—a most interesting section, some people would say—where bohemians have retained certain gay and attractive qualities and have added thereto a high degree of moral rectitude—and clean shirts. There were, besides the host and hostess, an actor and his wife, an American married couple living in London, a well-known sculptor and a lovely young woman who was, for the first time since her marriage, dining out deprived of the protection of her adoring husband. The last, Mrs. Mellor, was the living incarnation of the smooth, delicately-tinted beauties of a Christmas supplement, and to

judge from her conversation, had as little mental depth as the supplement has material thickness.

She found herself not only unprotected by her Charles, who was out of town for a day or two, but next to an actor, and the unusualness of the situation made her heart flutter and her color deepen. But the flutter was that of a mechanical canary bird and the blush was produced by trepidation, not by any pleasurable emotion.

The actor was thinking that it was easier to play a double rôle for a hundred consecutive nights than to strike a conversational spark from this unpromising material. His only recompense for the attempt was a super-excellent lobster cutlet, which he addressed with more satisfactory results.

Mrs. Oliver North, the American, sat beside Clement Moorlake, the sculptor. This was their first meeting, though they had many friends in common. Mrs. North had,

of course, heard of him very often and had seen several of his statues. She could not help thinking, as she now looked at him, that he was infinitely more interesting than any of his creations. His was the face of a man who has early found that life, lived in its fulness, means suffering. There was nothing, so far, in his conversation or his manner to imply that he had sad or secret memories, yet such was the impression at once produced on the mind of his new acquaintance. There was a certain quality in his beauty, his manner, his general bearing which can only be described as romantic. Women were often at once touched by it, and it sometimes led them to expect developments that would justify their estimate, though these expectations were doomed to remain unrealized.

In thinking of persons who are absent and trying to recall their personality, we are apt to remember vividly some one salient fea-

ture. In after days Althea, when conjuring up Moorlake's face, always saw his eyes. They were very remarkable—penetrating yet soft, keen yet kindly, brilliant yet tender. Their color was a dark hazel, which in some lights appeared brown, because of the blackness of the lashes. For the rest Althea thought that had *Romeo* lived to conquer his sorrow, he might, at forty, have been externally just such a man as Clement Moorlake.

Althea herself was barely thirty. She was a woman who, after eight years of married life that left much of her nature unsatisfied, was reaching out always for a consoling sympathy, which she seldom found, or found only to reject, because the coarseness of man's nature is prone to misinterpret such spiritual yearnings. Such a woman is dangerous—often to others and always to herself.

Moorlake already found her charming.

He who created only in colorless stone could nevertheless appreciate the tinted whiteness of arms and shoulders that he would not have disdained to model.

Conversation just then was of the placid and agreeable kind that promotes digestion. No agitating party questions were ever allowed at the Vincent table. The Vincents did not "go in" for politics, though they had intimate friends on both sides. Vincent was a violent Radical, he always said, yet no one could associate this characterization with his benign expression and slow, lazy utterance.

"Not only are Vincent's dinners irreproachable," a well-known diner-out had once said, "but they always agree with me, because they are accompanied by the sauce of good humor."

In a pause of the general conversation Mrs. Vincent's voice was heard.

"I learned such a good definition of a

wife the other day," she said. "Effie Nixon said, in her sharp way: 'I don't want to marry! What is a wife, anyway? Only an upper servant engaged by the lifetime without wages.'"

North laughed a little.

"Are you sure," said he, "that it was not my wife who said that? I believe that's her view."

Moorlake glanced at Althea. Her lips compressed slightly.

"Do you remember," said Banfrey, the actor, eager to divert the conversation, "a pretty little American woman named Escott?" He addressed Mrs. Vincent more particularly.

"Yes," answered that lady. "A gay, pleasant creature. What about her?"

"Since she has returned home her husband is suing a man in New York for alienating her affections. The man has had to mortgage his house in order to pay."

"What a revolting thing!" exclaimed Mrs. North, "to put a money value on a woman's affections."

"Far better," said North, sharply, "to put a bullet into the man."

"My dear Oliver," protested Vincent, lazily, "how drastic!"

"In my opinion that is the only way to deal with such a scoundrel," answered North, quite seriously.

Althea's cheek burned. She turned to Moorlake. "Isn't that an awful idea," she said, "to guard a woman's faith with a revolver?"

"Unnecessarily stern, perhaps," he said, smiling. "There are pleasanter ways of keeping a wife's love."

Althea looked straight at her husband.

"What if Mrs. Escott *wanted* to have her affections alienated?" she demanded, with more earnestness than the occasion seemed to warrant.

"Then she ought to be shot, too," said North, imperturbably.

Mrs Mellor looked pained.

"What a horrid subject!" she murmured to Banfrey, without, however, expecting his sympathy. She had a fixed idea that all actors are immoral.

The Vincents regarded Mrs. North with interest.

"Let us have your opinion, dear lady," said Bertram. "It is sure to be worth hearing."

Althea's cheeks were very red, and she held her head very high.

"I think," she said, deliberately, "that the only man who is answerable for alienating a married woman's affections is her own husband."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"That is a dark saying," observed Vincent, presently, "but I suppose it means something."

"I see!" said Mrs. Banfrey. "It means that you can't pour water into a full jug!"

"A full jug meaning a heart full of love," said Mrs. Vincent. "I understand. Women can love only one man at a time, and the husband has only to see that *he* is that man."

"You have been happy in choosing your women friends," said Banfrey, cynically, "if that's the only kind you know."

"Oh, actors see the seamy side," said Nellie Vincent, lightly. "No one minds what they say."

"I wish Charlie were here!" murmured the bride to herself.

North looked very angry.

"Why did you start all this?" he asked of his wife, with an absence of courtesy which made Moorlake indignant.

"As a warning to husbands!" said Althea, with an attempt at lightness.

North turned to his neighbor with some rather irrelevant remark.

Under cover of the general conversation that now began Althea spoke to Moorlake.

"You understand what I mean, don't you?" she asked, almost appealingly.

"I think I do; and I quite agree with you," he answered.

Just then Mrs. Vincent made a sign to Mrs. Banfrey, and the women left the room.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PICTURE

"COME upstairs to the studio," said the hostess. "I want you to see Bertie's picture. I like it amazingly, though perhaps I'm rather prejudiced." She laughed lightly as she stood on the shallow step, waiting for her friends to precede her.

"You know I gave him the subject," said Mrs. North.

"I know you did; it's a good idea, and one that wouldn't have occurred to Bertie. He isn't given to ghostly things."

The studio was a room about thirty feet square, in which Vincent painted, composed, etched, sang, and did a few other things. He considered himself only an amateur at these various pursuits, for he asserted that

no man can espouse any one art if he coquette with all the others.

"Don't show the picture till Mr. Vincent comes up," said Mrs. Mellor, with timid sweetness.

"Very well," said Mrs. Vincent, and as she spoke she deftly wheeled the easel round so that the picture was hidden.

"Now, my dear, come and sit by me. I haven't seen you for a blue moon," and she took Althea's hand, leading her to a small sofa.

The other two women, forced into friendly relations by this manœuver, sat down beside a fire of vari-colored driftwood.

The appearance of coffee and liqueurs put the finishing touch to the sense of well-being which should belong to the after-dinner hour.

"Tell me, Althea," pursued Nellie Vincent, "why so severe on husbands? Has Oliver been alienating your affections?"

" He has been . . . as usual."

" No lucid intervals ? "

" Short—very short. I am desperate ! If it were not for the child I should leave it all."

" Ah, the child ! Children are the rivets in the matrimonial chain. They hold the wretched parents together. I thought you very bitter at dinner. I saw the beloved Moorlake look at you with interest. By the way, did he impress you ? "

" Of course. He must impress everyone."

" But not always pleasantly. Some people hate him."

" No doubt—vain women and unattractive men. He would make both feel uncomfortable."

" You know that coarse creature, Winterham ? He calls Moorlake all sorts of names. He says he's a prig—looks like ' something sugar-coated made up by the chemist.' "

" Tell him I wish he would give me the address of that chemist ! "

"Althea, you alarm me!"

"No, my dear, you need not be afraid. Where have you kept this rare creature all these years, that you produce him only now?"

"He has kept himself in Italy."

"He looks a little Italian, though not so black as some. I hate black men! What is his history?"

"Why do you think he has one?"

"Because he's unmarried. All bachelors have a history."

"And some married men! Yes, we think he has one, but I won't tell you about him; it will make him too interesting."

"Providence has made him that already.'

At that moment a lady entered the room, the maid, a little in advance, announcing, "Mrs. Hilyer."

The new-comer was small and slight, with dark, curly hair and deep blue eyes. She wore over an amber satin gown a long white cloak trimmed with feathers.

"I'm aware that this is without precedent!" she exclaimed—if a remark uttered in such a low, sweet voice could be called an exclamation—"but I'm on my way to a neighbor of yours, and I wanted to remind you of tomorrow. Had you forgotten?"

She addressed Mrs. Vincent, and kissed her on both cheeks as soon as she had finished speaking.

"Bother my neighbor!" said Nellie, cordially. "Take off this delicious, fluffy garment and spend an hour with us. The men will be up in a minute. Clement Moorlake is here."

"Do you think I require that as an inducement?" demanded Mrs. Hilyer, with soft reproachfulness. "I can't stay. My carriage is here."

"Send it away, then. Bertram will take you over to the Bascombes'. It's just across the street."

"Very well. You always seduce me from

the path of duty—" allowing the maid to divest her of the cloak. " Tell my man to come back—to the house opposite—at one o'clock."

Then she turned to Althea. " How rude I have been! I did not recognize you at once. I'm rather blind. How are you ? "

Althea responded pleasantly. She knew Mrs. Hilyer very little, but thought her interesting. The new arrival then found that she also knew both the ladies by the fire, and went over to speak to them.

" What! a fire in June, Nellie ?"

" It looks pretty, and the evenings are cold," said Mrs. Banfrey.

" Yes," hazarded the lovely Mrs. Mellor; " there was a slight frost last night."

These profound observations were interrupted by the entrance of the men.

Clement Moorlake came in first, with his firm, elastic tread, very different from the slouch, stride or waddle of the bulk of man-

kind. One could not hear his step without divining how near perfection his proportions must be. He spoke to Mrs. Hilyer with his usual calm, gentle manner, but Althea fancied that the lady in amber satin found his greeting cold. She was certainly very pale.

They held a short dialogue.

"Where have you been all these weeks?" asked she.

"Working away in the fog at a statue that wouldn't come right," said the sculptor.

"Not even for you?" she asked, in a low voice.

Moorlake looked annoyed. "It was not a Galatea—something much more obstinate, but not half so dangerous," he said.

Vincent interrupted them with a boisterous welcome.

"They all want to see the picture, Bertie," said his wife. "And then they want a song, that latest one, you know—and then——"

"And then they must go down into the

kitchen and see you make that deliriously lovely pudding you invented last week!" laughed Bertram.

"Ah," sighed Mrs. Bertram, "we're a wonderful couple."

As two or three of the company moved toward the easel North came and began talking to Mrs. Hilyer. The fireside group, finding the blaze more picturesque than comfortable, also drifted towards the picture. Moorlake stood near Althea.

"I inspired this picture," she confided to him. "I feel quite anxious to see my godchild."

"I hope it is worthy of such a sponsor!" he replied, with mock solemnity.

Vincent wheeled the picture into a good position. "It is called," he said, "'The Faithful Soul.'"

"Which is the faithful one?" asked Banfrey.

"The poor ghost," returned Vincent.

"Ah, it's easy for a ghost to be faithful," said the actor.

Gladys Mellor looked shocked.

The picture was extremely well done. It represented an avenue of lime trees in which stood a man and a woman. It was night, but the moonlight fell through the breaks between the boughs and revealed the figures. The girl, a lovely creature dressed in a short-waisted white gown, was hanging on the arm of the man. Every curve of her young body told of love and of complete absorption in her companion. But he, a fine, stalwart fellow, was diverted from her by something that was evidently invisible to her. His startled gaze was directed at a form white as a moonbeam and almost as intangible ; the face of the fair wraith was more distinct and the expression of mingled reproach and agony on its features was clearly discernible.

"Bravo, Bertie !" said Moorlake, heartily.

"This is good. You ought to send it to the Academy."

"Don't you think there are enough amateurs there already?" queried Vincent, with assumed indifference. He was really immensely pleased by Moorlake's honest praise.

"Isn't it good, Mrs. North?" asked the sculptor.

"Alas, poor ghost!" she sighed, her eyes full of tears.

"What is it?" asked Banfrey. "I think it's ripping, old man. Where did you get the idea?"

"From this dear lady," said Vincent, with a look of brotherly regard at Althea—"and from Adelaide Procter."

"Ah, yes," said Moorlake, "I remember—

> "In that one minute's anguish
> The thousand years have passed."

"Who was the person?" asked Mrs. Hilyer, who, accompanied by North, had come to look at the picture.

"The faithful soul belonged, of course, to a female ghost," said Nellie Vincent.

"What nonsense!" said Vincent. "How can a soul belong to a ghost? You do muddle things so!"

"It is beautiful, Bertie, beautiful!" said North, "but too ethereal for me. I like real things," and he sauntered away.

"Do you think there is no fidelity in man?" asked Moorlake of Althea, as they lingered a moment beside the picture.

"Not often," said Mrs. North.

"Yet I know a man," he said, reflectively, "who has loved one woman for fifteen years."

"Then he is all the nearer to a change," she laughed, with assumed hardness.

He looked into her eyes almost sadly, and saw that she was an unhappy woman.

"How bitter you are!" he said. "And yet nature has done so much for you. . .

I hope we may meet again ; I must go on now." He shook hands with her as he spoke.

"Come to see me," she said, with a strange sense of fear that she might lose him altogether.

"I shall be most happy," he said, in a conventional tone, and went to take leave of the Vincents.

"Are you going to the Bascombes' ?" asked Mrs. Hilyer.

"No; unfortunately in quite another direction," said Moorlake.

Mrs. Banfrey remarked, a few moments later, as she and Althea put on their cloaks downstairs :

"Nellie is easily deceived. Mrs. Hilyer knew that Moorlake was dining here. That's why she came. She has been in love with him for years . . ."

In the carriage, as they drove home, Oliver North said to his wife : "Do you

know that you have been exceptionally odious to-night—even for you ?"

"You don't mind telling me so," said Althea.

"Your remarks about marriage were simply depraved. I wonder a decent woman could make them. They make me wonder if you *are* decent. You grow more reckless every day, and let me tell you that your vulgar habit of making eyes at good-looking men is growing on you. You flirted outrageously with that sculptor fellow."

"No one *could* flirt with Mr. Moorlake," said Althea, indignantly. "You are too vulgar !"

"Not so vulgar as the actions I refer to. No one has the courage to tell you your faults but me."

"*You* have plenty of courage !" she said, sharply. Then silence fell between them. When they reached home North put the key in the door without a word and allowed his

wife to pass in. She went directly upstairs, and without removing her cloak entered the nursery, where her child lay asleep. The nurse was in a bed beside the crib, and slumbered too deeply to be aware of her mistress's presence. Althea bent over the little girl.

"If it were not for you!" she murmured; "oh, baby, if it were not for you!"

Then she went away noiselessly to her own room.

## CHAPTER III

### HUSBAND AND WIFE

ALTHEA had been one of those unlucky girls who are born for love and for nothing else. Her youth was taken up by poetry and dreams. An orphan of small means, she was brought up by an old-fashioned aunt, who did not take much pains with her education. She had fed her mind on visions of love—innocent enough, but enervating and dangerous, because she made the mistake of supposing that love is the whole of life. Instead of filling her days with interesting pursuits, she waited, wondering when the king would come. She tried to fit her ideal to every man she met, and when Oliver North asked her to marry him, he seemed

nearer her romantic standard than the others. She required to be loved. Her existence was incomplete without someone on whom to lavish the great devotion of which she was capable. But she made, in the first flush of her hopefulness and enthusiasm, the mistake of marrying a man who began by being somewhat cold and who ended, as we have seen, by becoming something less than civil. North was a person in whose life women were a mere episode, and not a very interesting one. He had, more than most men, a talent for fidelity, physical and mental. The idea of loving anyone but his lawful wife would have been to him terrible. It is doubtful whether he ever entertained it. But no feminine creature could play a large rôle in his existence. The charms of mountain-climbing, yachting or exploring strange countries appealed to him irresistibly. When he tired for a time of these pursuits he would return home, expecting to find

that his wife had been quietly fulfilling her domestic duties with discretion and was ready to receive him with an ardor devoid of reproaches for his long absence. And that is what he did find. For years Althea accepted this lot as the usual portion of wives, hung on Oliver's words as those of an oracle, punctually discharged her duties, and solaced herself with her child and the companionship of a few women friends. Men she liked individually rather than collectively, but she never had a shadow of a flirtation during all those devoted years.

North combined the passions of an explorer with the didactic talent of a schoolmaster. He thought he knew exactly how everyone should think, feel and act, and in his domestic intervals he occupied himself with forming his wife's character. Pretty young women who find that they have power to charm even in their crude state usually resent being formed, but for years

Althea submitted to this process with comparative equanimity.

One day there came a change. During one of Oliver's more than ordinary protracted yachting cruises, which a constitutional aversion to the sea prevented her sharing, it dawned on her that she did very well without Oliver. The novel discovery gave her a shock. On considering it she realized that without him the house was quieter, everything ran more smoothly, and her nerves were certainly under better control. In short, she became once more an individual, not a faint reflection; became herself, not a poor attempt at a copy of someone whom she could never really resemble.

When a woman once finds the wings of her soul she is forever out of reach of the man who has sought to cage her. Henceforth Althea belonged, in a sense, to herself, though she had not the courage openly to oppose the hundred small tyrannies with

which North oppressed her. He had, without deliberate intention, thrown away a heart rich with unquestioning love. Friends who had anxiously watched the slow process of which he was unconscious, pitied while they blamed him, and feared for the future. Yet he thought he loved her, and it is certain that he loved no one else. Indeed, as she cooled, and failed to cower and weep under his frequent disapproval, he grew warmer and less willing to leave her than of old. What she had once resented she would now have prized—freedom and solitude, leave to live her own life, which, if not heroic, was at least innocent.

North had one fault that no woman ever forgives: he was stingy. Though in possession of an income of about £4,000 a year, he disputed every item of the household accounts. Once a month, at least, when the hateful tradesmen's books came in, there was an unpleasant scene between the pair, which

usually ended for Althea in a nervous attack. Oliver liked keeping open house, but did not enjoy paying for the pleasure. He was also under the impression that women in society require next to no pin money. Althea's financial position was a painful one, because she had only £50 a year of her own, and she could not possibly dress on such a small sum. She had to plead abjectly with her master when she wanted a new gown.

On the morning after the Vincents' dinner party she entered the library knowing that a disagreeable encounter lay before her. North was reading the paper. On his desk lay a note, stamped and addressed. It contained an order for extensive improvements to his yacht, which was being put in commission.

He looked up at Althea.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, with a sort of sarcastic playfulness. "You never come here unless you want something."

Althea repressed the ready repartee on her lips and said, quietly:

"I *do* want something. I have been overhauling my wardrobe with Barnes, and she and I both think I can't get through the season without some new clothes."

"Why must you quote Barnes? The season is nearly over," said North, with a vexed expression on his face.

"The Summer is here, and I can't possibly make those country visits with the things I have."

"Where are your last year's clothes? Given away, I suppose."

"Worn out, most of them."

"Can't you buy more, if it's absolutely necessary?"

"Certainly, if I have the money."

"You have £100 a year. Most women can make themselves look well on that."

"Fifty of that is my own. If you allowed me a hundred I might manage."

She began to be exasperated, and made a struggle to remain calm. There was a painful tension in her face which would have told her husband what she suffered, but he did not look at her.

"What does it matter what you wear?" he asked. "Women spend far too much on their clothes."

"It matters this much: I go now to a second-rate dressmaker, and I can't afford to do even that. If you refuse to give me a decent allowance I must refuse to go into the world any more."

"What a stagey expression! 'Into the world!' It sounds like a woman in a cheap novel."

She still controlled herself.

"Oliver," she said, in a hard, low voice, "why do you grudge me everything I need? I am not indifferent to your comfort. If our positions were reversed, and I had your income, you would not have to come to me to

beg when you needed things. I shouldn't wait for that. I should give you what you wanted."

"I have no wish to deprive you of what you need. *Need* and *want* are two very different things. You have a charming house, a very good turnout and——"

"A generous husband!" she interrupted, her scorn breaking all bounds. "I have my answer. You refuse me—*refuse* me—you, with your thousands a year—a few pounds for the necessaries of life! Oliver, has it ever occurred to you that I hate my life? that I long to be free?"

She flushed all over as she spoke, alarmed at her own bluntness.

Her husband looked at her.

"You hate your life because you do nothing with it. You starve your brain. You should have pursuits and interests as I have. And as to freedom, what woman has more? I leave you alone for six months out

of the twelve. Not many men have so much confidence in their wives."

"You are a strange mixture!" she retorted, "with your 'absolute confidence' when you are away, and your constant suspicion when you are at home! But there is no use in talking to you about all this. Do you refuse me the money?"

"I can't very well let you have any now," he answered. "The *Jessamine* needs a lot done to her——"

"Ah, my rival!" cried Althea, with a short laugh. "I might have known you would deny me everything sooner than grudge her a coat of paint."

"Many wives would be happy to have only an inanimate rival!" said he. "I am going away soon, and you'll be rather quiet, I suppose, and won't want many clothes."

Without another word Althea left the room. Interviews of this sort always left her with a half-stunned feeling. She could

not understand why her life must be bound up with this man's—why her youth and her prettiness must be wasted in such uncongenial companionship. As she sat brooding in her morning-room, her unpaid bills spread out before her, suddenly an image rose before her mind. The eyes of Clement Moorlake seemed to look down on her troubled soul—to penetrate into her weary heart—and their phantasmal glance brought quiet to her being. "There are kind and gentle men in the world, after all!" she thought. "Thank God for them!"

## CHAPTER IV

### A TÊTE-À-TÊTE

SHE felt the imperative need of getting away to some place where she could breathe fresh air and see grass and flowers. Still in a sort of blind rage, she went to the nearest underground railway station and took a ticket for Kew. How often she had sat in cab, train, carriage or omnibus, with her heart full of bitterness, her soul in revolt! She wearied herself with thought ; her lips framed, without uttering, long colloquies between her husband and herself—imaginary scenes in which at last she triumphed and convinced him of his meanness. The unhappy woman had been born with a strong sense of the dramatic—a gift that adds an-

other pang to an unhappy lot. All her life appeared to her in scenes, acts, situations; and of each she felt the force and poignancy, knowing meanwhile that she lacked the self-control necessary to enact a consistent rôle. She lacked the balance to adhere to a certain line of conduct, or she might have mastered her tyrant. She was canine —not feline, and there lay her failure. The dog watches his master with fear or affection, or both, written in his eyes; the cat pursues her sinuous way with complete indifference. The dog looks at you *with* his eyes —the consciousness of the cat sits behind hers, and peeps *through* them, so that none can divine her meaning. When she confers a favor she makes the recipient feel proud. As for the dog, one knows *he* will be pleased if thrown a kind word, and there is rather a contempt for his ready demonstration of affection.

The woman who lays bare her soul to a

man has lost her hold on him. Her very honesty is her ruin.

Through the purgatory of the underground railway Althea reached the paradise of Kew Gardens. They were in full beauty with their masses of gorgeous rhododendron, the daisied turf, like green embroidered velvet, and the birds trilling, warbling, whistling and chirping in the heavenly blue air of June.

The human race began in a garden—would that it had stayed there !

The turmoil in the soul of the woman abated in the calm of the place.

For hours Althea sat under the great trees or slowly paced the fragrant ways. The one great safeguard of ardent, headlong natures is a latent power to right themselves. The pendulum swings lightly back again. By three o'clock Mrs. North began to realize that life was not quite without charm, and that she was prosaically hungry. Almost

laughing at this assertion of her physical being, she made her way toward the tea-house. And as she turned a leafy corner, she came full on Clement Moorlake. Life is sadly unlike the drama in that the time, the place and the man are generally wide apart. To-day, of all the persons on earth whom she might have met, Althea wished most to see the sculptor. Yet for a moment she shrank from the encounter. Only for a moment; Moorlake looked like the high priest of conventionality. Althea's exuberant fancy quailed before his calm greeting.

"Is this one of your favorite haunts, Mrs. North?" he asked. "I come here often when London seems to press too heavily."

"I love it," said Althea. "I break away sometimes and sit for an hour under the trees. Why is it that life under the trees is so easy?"

In her words there was an underlying pathos, an unconscious claim for sympathy,

that did not escape Moorlake's keen perceptions.

"Because," he said, looking down at her with a kindly light in his eyes, "we have nothing to do but rest and gather strength there. But you would not like life always to be made up of sheltering boughs and soft turf, would you? You are too active, too intelligent, to like inglorious ease."

"How do you know?" she asked. "You have seen me only once."

"That is enough to enable me to at least guess at your character, isn't it? A sculptor becomes a bit of a physiognomist—but how personal I am getting!" he went on. "Forgive me!"

"I think nothing is interesting unless it is personal," admitted Althea, more gayly. Her color had come back and her tread was once more elastic.

"Interesting—yes," said her companion, reflectively. "But I have rather a horror

of personalities. One's own sorrows are enough, without knowing the griefs of others."

"What a selfish sentiment! Do you build a high wall about yourself?"

"With a door in it!" he said, smiling; "and I have been weak enough sometimes to lend the key."

As he looked at her his somewhat sad, stern face relaxed, and again she saw the warm, friendly light in the eyes which belied the coldness of his usual manner.

"Are there many keys?" she asked, playfully.

"Not out of my keeping," he answered. "I have learned to neither borrow nor lend —now."

"I know those resolutions! One says, 'This is the last time,' and one says it every time."

"But some time must really be the last!"

"Yes; but the charm is, one never

knows that that particular time is the last! . . . I wish I could build a wall! I have only a hedge full of gaps—not even a thorn or two!"

"Only flowers on the top?"

Both laughed, and then were silent, wondering whether they had known each other ten minutes or half a lifetime.

"I once read in a theosophical book," resumed Althea, "that one must imagine one's self enclosed in a sort of shell, like a horse chestnut, and then the sorrows of the world will glide off, not stay to harass and torment. Isn't it a funny idea?"

"Not a pleasant one, certainly. Here we are at the tea place. Are you hungry?" inquired Moorlake, abruptly.

"Well—yes—I am," admitted Althea. "It seems too gross a confession to make in such a place, on such a day, but I've had no luncheon."

"My dear lady, what a tragedy! Instead

of metaphysics we should be having tea—or shall it be 'cold luncheon, two to six?'" asked Moorlake, glancing at the placard above them.

"Oh, tea, by all means—buns, cresses, jam—all sorts of lovely things!" cried Althea, softly, with a child's pleasure.

The place was deserted, the lunchers having departed and the tea drinkers not having yet arrived. They chose a table outside the building and ordered tea.

Althea's day of misery had suddenly turned into an exquisitely interesting occasion, and fate having contrived a tête-à-tête with the most interesting man of her acquaintance, she submitted without a murmur.

"I was most interested last night," said Moorlake, as they settled themselves comfortably opposite each other at the little table, "in the conversation about constancy."

"Mrs. Mellor was shocked, I think," said Althea. "Isn't she lovely?"

"As lovely as waxwork—and as attractive."

"I thought beauty was always attractive."

"Yes, for a moment—but think of a life spent with such a woman!"

"I have always supposed that men do not require brains in the women they love."

"Some men may not, and if they don't they don't deserve them. But you can't seriously think that pink-and-white inanity could satisfy a man with any mind? Charm is the enduring quality. I know women of fifty who will never be old, because they have charm. That nameless something holds a man's interest longer than anything else."

His remarkable eyes were fixed dreamily on the gray-green distance. Althea looked at him and wondered more than ever what the story of his life was. His face had noth-

ing middle-aged in its lines, though the thick, waving hair above it was shot with a few gray threads.

"I wish," said Althea, averting her gaze as his eyes traveled back to her, "I wish I could for one hour be a man, in order to discover your standpoint. We women are so helpless—so in the dark! We have no freedom in which to gain experience. We never learn to know you well. There seems to be no friendship possible between us. It is all passionate love—or utter indifference. I wish I could know just once what you really are; what standards you have—what beliefs—what convictions."

"There are as many standards as there are men," said Moorlake.

"But there are hard-and-fast rules for you as for us. You must not cheat at cards, for instance. You must not 'kiss and tell.' I always think life must be easy to men, because the world expects so little from them."

"Most decent men have a few virtues besides the negative one of not being blackguards," laughed Moorlake. "Don't you think we have our struggles?—that we mark out a line of conduct for ourselves, and try with tears and prayers, perhaps, to keep to it? I think men and women are wonderfully alike, only you are more complex."

"Have you ever studied palmistry?" asked Althea. "Do you notice how complicated a woman's hand is, compared with a man's? Our hands are full of little, nervous, niggling, criss-cross lines, and yours have plain, deep-cut marks, either good or bad."

"Those little marks mean flirtation," said Moorlake, laughing. "Let me see yours."

"I have a chain of them—but they aren't true," said Althea, coloring like a girl and hiding her hand under the table.

"Even a woman's hands can lie, then," said Moorlake, still regarding her with an

amused smile. "Her lips are not false enough! What little hands you American women have!"

"All wrong from a sculptor's point of view, of course. I feel that I must admit—no—do I dare?"

She paused and looked at him sidelong, with a sort of childlike glance that charmed him.

"Confess?" said he; "certainly. I can endure a great deal."

"Well—I don't like statues," she admitted and colored brightly.

"I'm very glad!" said he, placidly. "That saves a lot of trouble. You can't think how tiresome people are who think they care, and in point of fact know nothing whatever about art. They torment me with ignorant criticisms until my politeness gives way."

"That I can't imagine," said Althea. "You are *fearfully* polite."

Moorlake laughed.

"Do you find that fault with the men of this generation? When I was young one didn't dare to be rude."

"That, I suppose, was a long time ago."

"So long that you seem to me a mere child."

Althea shook her head, and said, half-sadly, "I shall never be grown up—and eternal youth of the soul doesn't save one's poor face from wrinkles. It is terrible to be a middle-aged baby!"

There was now no further pretext for remaining at the table, so the waiter was paid, and they rose to go away.

The day was growing more enchanting as it declined. The level beams of light played a thousand lovely tricks with flowers and sward. The birds' hearts gushed out in melody. London and its smoke seemed far away. Sordid care and bitter disappointment have no place in Kew Gardens.

A calm settled on Althea's heart—a calm

with a strange, pleasant fluttering underneath. She seemed to see how happy life might have been.

She and Moorlake went back to town by underground railway ; and for once the sulphurous air seemed sweet and bracing. She reached home in a mood of quiet happiness, which not even North's continued captiousness could mar.

But there is one drawback to spending an hour or two with a very sympathetic and delightful person—one wants immediately to spend many more!

And the opportunity for this did not at once recur.

## CHAPTER V

### THE MIDDLE COURSE

CONCEIVE a young and pretty woman alternately bullied and neglected, and you will understand that she may some day begin to cry for the moon. It is generally that moon which is so brilliant and attractive and far away, called Love.

We call to it to come down, and it stays above ; we rake for it in the stagnant water of a pond, as did the " Three Sillies " in the fairy tale, and we succeed only in stirring up the mud. Love, that protean phantasm, is no doubt a useful thing to the poet and the writer of songs ; but the search after it is a sad and unremunerative occupation. Althea had not yet begun it ; but she was frequently troubled by a strong desire to see Clement Moorlake again.

Rigid moralists always say, in speaking of a poor, disappointed, mismated woman and the needs of her heart: "Are not her children enough for her?" As well direct a man to the town pump to allay a craving for champagne. What woman of heart and imagination does not crave the thousand touches of cherishing tenderness which a man who loves her bestows on her life? Can she discuss the problem of her soul with her baby? Can she spend all her evenings in hearing her children's artless prayers? Can even the education of her family become so intensely enthralling that she has neither time nor inclination to listen to Love's voice? A human woman must and will love somebody. When it isn't the right man—which it seldom is—it will be the wrong one; and she always thinks that the wrong one *is* the right one, or would have been if she had had half a chance.

Oliver North departed, as usual, at a few

hours' notice, on a perfectly rational and respectable yachting cruise, in company with several estimable male friends. The law could pick no flaw in his behavior; the divorce court could not pronounce on it. Meanwhile his bored and starved wife was left at home on short commons, both temporal and spiritual.

"You are a wonderfully good woman," said Nellie Vincent one day when she and Althea were driving together. "I wonder why you've kept straight so long."

Althea opened her eyes.

"Why, how could I be anything else? I've never been tempted," she said.

"Then," said Nellie, "the men are better than I thought."

"No one would dare to make love to me," added Althea, as an afterthought. "Besides, women don't want to be wicked. They only want to be loved."

"Ah, yes, that's so simple, isn't it?" said

Nellie, with a sort of grim gayety. "What a pity the men won't understand!" Then, after a pause, "Moorlake is going to call on you."

"Really? How nice!" said Althea. I think he is most interesting."

"A good many have thought so. Don't, my dear, *don't* love *him*. It won't repay you."

"I can't imagine having the impertinence to love him. I should *revere* him."

It was about a week after this that the sculptor appeared in Pont street. Althea had thought, after their semi-intimate tea at Kew, that she should certainly see him very soon. But she didn't know Moorlake. He was vagueness itself when it came to making calls or performing any other social duties. Even his friendships had vast lapses, during which he was seen by no one but his old mother, with whom he lived.

When he entered the drawing-room Al-

thea was listlessly reading a small volume of verses which had lately appeared. It was a fine afternoon, but she had not felt like rousing herself to go out. She was in the mood that comes to some women during the London season when every hour is not filled with pleasant engagements. They feel that they ought to be doing something brilliant and fascinating every day, and when they are not they lose interest in life.

Moorlake's entrance was a welcome interruption. It seemed all at once that she had a hundred things to say to him; and yet when they were seated near each other, with at least half an hour before them, she began to experience a sense of vacancy.

He began with the usual conventionalities —the weather, inquiries after Oliver North, and uninteresting remarks on the subjects of the day. It did not escape him that there was a certain dryness in her replies when he mentioned her husband, and he at

once let the subject drop. She who was so fluent with other men was perturbed and unnatural in his presence. She wanted to appear well—to win his regard, and she found herself dull and almost speechless. His very look to-day was irritatingly impersonal. Only life in the abstract seemed capable of touching him. The longer they sat thus the tenser became the strain. The appearance of tea made a happy diversion.

Presently Moorlake said: "What were you reading when I came in? Something new?"

"A curious little booklet called 'Poems of a Pessimist.' There appears to be much pessimism in it and little poetry," said Althea.

"Won't you read a little? I fancy that you must read well," he observed.

"Here is a bit—very pathetic, though not inspired at all," said she, turning over the leaves. "It is called 'Woman's Lot.' That

is generally the preface to a moan, isn't it? It says:

"For what are women made?
To sit and wait—and wait—and try to hope;
To take with thankfulness the crumbs of life;
To press back tears that else would dim the sight;
To choke down sobs that else would rend the throat;
To bear the sorrows that are laid on them,
Sometimes by hands that should be their support.
For this are women made.

"And what is their reward?
A year or two of love—sweet, but soon cold;
A gleam or two of sun, soon hid by clouds;
A fervent kiss—a hand-clasp—an embrace—
A kind word, and the dear-bought privilege
Of bearing pains and sorrows not their own—
The rest is vain regret.

"Isn't that dreadful?" she asked, faltering a little over the last line.

"Dreadful!" assented Moorlake; "and written, of course, by a woman."

"Of course. I wonder what made her so bitter and sad? A man, I suppose."

"It is not always like that. Men become pessimists too, you know, through women."

"I'm so glad!" Althea almost smiled. I wish I could meet one."

"One sits before you," said Moorlake. He also was smiling slightly, and a little color had risen in his pale face.

"*You?* Impossible! You are too strong and wise and well balanced to let such a poor, inadequate thing as a woman change your life."

"Who told you I was all those nice things?"

"Several people—but I knew it before."

"Do you know, Mrs. North," said Moorlake, after a slight pause full of interest for both, "you have a very unwholesome effect on me? You positively make me morbid, and you cause me to talk about myself. That will never do. You mustn't look over my wall, you know!"

"I can't!" she protested. "I can't see

a thing. It's much too high and has spikes on top. But you are rather unkind to go about like a fascinating novel with the pages uncut."

"Do you prefer men who make their moan to every new acquaintance?" he asked.

She shrank a little and changed color.

"Forgive me," she said, quietly. "I was forgetting that we are strangers."

Most men would have found this an opportunity for a pretty speech. Moorlake only observed: "Not quite strangers, I hope." Then he added: "What is the reason there is so much unhappiness among women, especially of late years? Is it because you are idle and fanciful?—or what is it?"

"Because we are idealists, and we *won't* accept the world as it is; and the world to most women means—some man."

"I think that diagnosis is too flattering to

us, don't you? There are many women just now who appear to be quite independent of us."

"Who appear so; but in reality you will find, if you look, that the eternal masculine is at the bottom of all their restless strivings. They work to forget, most of them. I suppose work dulls the pain of one's heart, but it can't cure it. It's only a temporary anæsthetic. Do you suppose if I am unhappy and scrub a floor, or write a novel, as the case may be, that when my floor is clean or my novel written I won't be just as unhappy as I was before?"

"Possibly," said Moorlake. "Go on and tell me more. You interest me enormously."

"The more I see of life the less I understand it," Althea continued, her eyes and cheeks burning. She was at that moment compellingly attractive. "It seems to me as if Providence had put us all down on this

earth like a mass of blind kittens. We crawl and mew, and scratch and knock into one another, and have no idea why we're here or where we're going. As soon as one kitten gets to love another it loses it ; we have scarcely got our eyes open when we're snatched away to some other strange place, before we have a chance to do more than to wonder what it's all about."

Moorlake leaned forward and looked at her intently. Her eyes shone with tears.

"My dear lady!" he said, in a deep, tender voice, "is that really your idea of life?"

"Sometimes—not always. It is to-day." She tried to smile, and failing, got up and stood at the window, with her back to him. He came and stood near her—very near, though there was no actual contact. His proximity thrilled her from head to foot.

"Dear Mrs. North," he said, in a low voice, "I am years older than you are, and

therefore perhaps a little wiser. Believe me, you are not a blind kitten ! Life is full of sunshine for you if you will look for it. We all go through a trying period in which we feel that we are failures. No one worth his salt escapes that phase. But by-and-bye we recognize what our work in the world is to be. We cease to expect great happiness, but we find resignation."

Althea turned her face toward him.

" Have you found it ?" she asked.

" I think so," he said, gravely.

"And with it—indifference," she said.

" I hope so—but I am not sure."

There was a curious spark in his eyes as he spoke.

" Friendship is left for all of us," Althea cried, impulsively, almost with pleading in her voice. " Be my friend ! Help me ! I do so need a friend ! I felt at once that I could trust you. Be my friend ! "

" I can't," he said, almost roughly. " You

can't trust me. You mustn't—I don't trust myself!" He flushed scarlet.

"Oh, you don't understand me!" she exclaimed. "You ought to—you're not like other men. I *mean* what I say. I have dreamed for years of such a friendship, which should be a constant consolation for all that one suffers. One gets bruised and battered on the sharp corners of life, and the regard, the interest of a good man would be a healing balm."

She stood and looked at him with eyes full of a pure pleading. He did not misunderstand her. He took her hand very gently and led her back to her seat. Then he sat down beside her.

"My dear Mrs. North," he said, gravely, "it is impossible. There is no such friendship."

"There is!" she persisted. "I say there is! There shall be. I will *make* it true."

"What you call friendship has another name," he said.

"Won't you believe me that I didn't mean that?" she begged.

"I am quite certain you did not," said Moorlake. "But I *know*, and you don't. It might be possible for you, but not for a man. We are not angels."

"Don't tell me that. I *know* there is a middle course."

"Not for us men. Our motto is, 'All or nothing.'"

They had both regained their self-command.

"I shall always persist," said Althea, "that I am right."

Moorlake rose to go.

"You may try the 'middle course' in thirty years—but not now, please, if you value our peace of mind."

"Please believe, Mr. Moorlake," said Al-

thea, as she shook hands with him, "that I am not always hysterical."

A smile was his only answer.

As he walked away he thought : "A most unhappy woman. There is only one thing that could make her more unhappy, and that shall never come to her through me."

The next day Oliver North unexpectedly returned and carried his family off to America.

Unkind circumstances—or a merciful Providence—kept Moorlake and Althea apart for four months.

## CHAPTER VI

### AN INVITATION TO TEA

FOR several years Mrs. Hilyer had been a widow. She had a daughter of fifteen, though she herself looked marvelously young without the aid of art. The girl was in France, at a school where accomplishments were plentiful though food was scanty. Mrs. Hilyer very much disliked having a daughter of fifteen in evidence ; besides it was so bad for the child to meet men, and Mrs. Hilyer's house was full of them of an afternoon.

The deceased Hilyer had been an easy-going, genial person in the City—the sort of man who slaps a friend on the back with one hand to conceal the fact that the other is in the friend's pocket. Clarice had been a

great help to him. She attracted almost everybody who knew her ; the occasional dissentient voices were so few and faint that the general pæan of praise drowned them. Clarice got a very amusing, pleasant circle about her. She had a great many men friends, and a number of women liked and admired her. There was one man particularly—George Watson—who had been for years very much in evidence. People said the friendship was extremely pretty and manifestly innocent, because they used to kiss each other good-night in public. When Hilyer died somebody said, "Now she'll marry Watson." But a cynic replied : "Men don't marry widows they've kissed as wives."

Certainly the marriage did not come off. Clarice Hilyer continued to live in a small house in Cheyne Walk and appeared to enjoy life as much as ever. During her varied experience in matters of the heart she had

the rare good sense to avoid concentration. The woman that concentrates suffers. She only tires the man she loves, for nothing bores a man so much as excessive affection. She may give her body to be burned to please him, but it will only annoy him. The Indian widows used to wait for this sacrifice till their lords were past being bored by it.

Clarice could keep a leash of admirers well in hand. Her nature was complex and sinuous ; compared to Althea's it was what Bradshaw is to an A B C—when you were once started you couldn't tell when or where you would arrive.

During a Winter spent in Rome Clarice became acquainted with Moorlake.

Henceforth other men had few attractions for her. She tried every resource at her command to gain his love ; she never left anything to chance, but marked out her plan of life as women draw a pattern in a

tea cloth, afterward following it out with embroidery silk. She knew what she wanted very distinctly, and when her silk grew knotted or broke she picked it out or cut it off and began again. She never had those fatal moments of frankness which make a woman blurt out things in five minutes that spoil the work of years. She studied Moorlake as a musician studies a score, a painter a model ; and the more she studied the more she found that the moon she was crying for was only a burnt-out crater. It took all her exquisite self-control to keep back the mad bitterness of the discovery. The sculptor was as hard as his marble ; and his beautiful, almost stately, courtesy to all women only added a sting to the despair of the one that loved him.

For fifteen years Moorlake had loved the memory of one woman. What had been the history—whether she were alive or dead —no one knew, and no one dared ask him.

In his early days he had been all made up of sentiment and passion. Some cruel disappointment dried up the one and left little of the other. He avoided all intimate relations with women. He was accustomed to say that society loses half its charm when people confide their troubles to one another. Before this reserve of character, this killing indifference, all Clarice's weapons fell powerless. Moorlake had one very charming quality, however : he always knew how to save a woman's self-respect. If any feminine admirer became indiscreetly pressing in her attentions, by a happy knack he managed to make it appear that in reality it was he who had taken the initiative ; whereas he spent a great part of his life in repelling such attacks.

When Clarice Hilyer left Rome she lost sight of him. Once she wrote to him, and received a prompt reply—a perfect model of a friendly letter, cool, pleasant, non-com-

mittal. There their intercourse ended. On the night when they met at the Vincents' house Clarice had come because she accidentally heard that he was dining there. It was not till Winter that she saw him again. They met at a Sunday luncheon, and found themselves next each other at table.

Clarice opened fire by saying: "I want so much to see your studio. How does it compare with the Roman one?"

"Very much as the English climate compares with the Italian," Moorlake replied, smiling, and ignoring the first part of her sentence.

"Ah, one misses the sun," she assented. "Do you think you are going to like Chelsea?"

"I can hardly tell yet—but inasmuch as I am a near neighbor of yours—" Another smile finished the sentence.

Clarice smiled also. She was too clever ever to look sentimental.

"Neighbors are proverbially strangers," she said. "Perhaps we shall meet occasionally on the Embankment."

"It is a fine place for constitutionals. I think I shall become fond of the river, even when it is cold and gray, as it is now."

"Your mother is with you?"

"Yes."

During the brief pause that ensued the man on the other side of Mrs. Hilyer spoke to her.

It was not till some minutes later that she turned swiftly and said, in an undertone: "I cannot help thinking that we ought to be friends. We have both outlived our illusions, and we are both—lonely."

Her voice shook a little.

"I thought loneliness was one of the few things not to be had in London," said Moorlake. "As for you, you are surrounded all day by an admiring throng, and have no time to be alone."

"There is a loneliness of the heart, I should say, if people hadn't ceased to plead guilty of having such things as hearts. You boast of being quite immune, I believe."

"Don't accuse me of anything so ill-bred as boasting! But I always think that hearts are best kept in the background, don't you?"

"Or dispensed with altogether. Have you seen Mrs. Oliver North since her return?"

His companion's abruptness confused Moorlake, as perhaps it was intended to do.

He hesitated for a moment, feeling suddenly guilty, he didn't know why, and then said, simply, "No; have you?"

"No, but I hear they are very unhappy."

Here again a diversion occurred, and the subject was not renewed. But the one allusion had the effect of sending Moorlake to Pont street that afternoon.

He was in his mind so strenuously opposed

to cultivating any intimacy with Althea that it was almost with a sense of surprise he found himself in her drawing-room.

A number of persons had been lunching with the Norths, but the last one had gone, and Oliver was out.

As Moorlake entered he received a distinct impression of the lassitude and dejection of Mrs. North's bearing—the worn, tired look on her face. In moments of animation the lines were smoothed away; but now that she fancied herself alone they were very apparent.

At sight of Moorlake she seemed almost agitated. A sudden gleam of joy swept over her face. He did not know—what was indeed the case—that for four months she had craved a sight of him.

The springs of sympathy surged up within him, and there was real feeling in his tone as he took her hand and asked her how she was.

"Oh, I'm unspeakably glad to get home!" she said, smiling brightly.

"And yet," he said, sitting beside her on the long sofa before the wood fire—"and yet you have come from what was your home."

"Yes—in a way, but not in any true sense. I never felt contented there. England was somewhere in my blood calling to me; and when I came here I at once recognized its claim on me."

"That is very pleasant for us to hear!" said Moorlake. "How did New York strike you after your absence?"

"As a place that is not over-comfortable for the rich and quite impossible for the poor. One must be either a millionaire or a pauper to live there. What strikes me as remarkable whenever I go back is the number of well-dressed women. Hardly anyone looks dowdy. And yet one knows that they are not all rich."

"American women spend a great deal on their clothes, I have always been told," observed Moorlake.

"Yes, when they have the money;—and sometimes, I fancy, when they haven't," replied Althea. "You can't conceive how grotesque it is to see women in beautiful gowns hanging on to a strap in an electric tram car—liable to be sent flying at any moment into the laps of strange men who do *not* get up to give them a seat! The air is full of clashing of bells, snorting of trains overhead, clattering of hoofs, rolling of wheels! It is a pandemonium, which grows worse every year."

"And how did your husband get on there? Does he like it?" asked Moorlake.

"Not particularly; we weren't there long, only in the Autumn, a few weeks ago. In August Oliver was yachting; he is always yachting when he is not mountain-climbing, you know."

"And you—I hope you amused yourself. I suppose you have a great many friends."

"Yes—but one does so drop out in the course of a year or two! Everything changes. New people are always cropping up and taking the old houses one used to know."

"It is becoming so here, too."

"But London is in a measure conservative. One sees the same butlers at the same houses year after year. The servant question in America has got beyond anything you can imagine."

"And on the whole you are glad to be here?"

"Oh, inexpressibly glad."

She looked as if she were very sincere.

"What plans has your husband made? Is he going to run away again soon?" asked Moorlake.

"Not yet, I think," she answered. "We shall stay at home now for a time."

"Have you any special projects for the Winter?" asked Moorlake. "I mean, have you a hobby?"

"No," said Althea; "I wish I had! A middle age without hobbies is worse than 'old age without cards,' which has been spoken of as such a terrible thing."

"Middle age is nothing to you, Mrs. North," replied Moorlake, "and need be nothing for at least fifteen years to come."

"I am over thirty," said Althea, smiling, "and I should be sorry to think I was only half through my pilgrimage."

Moorlake raised his hand as one playfully threatens a child.

"Again the mournful note! I thought we were to have no more 'blind kittens!'" he said, with a humorous light in his eyes.

"Oh, haven't you forgotten the blind kitten yet?" asked she. "I've been one for months, and sometimes a deaf and dumb

one—which is hard to believe of a woman, I know—but it's true."

Her face wore a look half-sad, half-merry, which made her charming. Moorlake's heart relented. Why must he always assume the highly didactic pose in her presence? He bent toward her slightly and let his eyes, in all their expressive beauty, rest on hers.

"Do you know," he said, "there are two reasons why I must never be an intimate friend of yours—can you guess them?"

Althea felt a quite irrational excitement pulsing through her veins. She withdrew her eyes and said, half-nervously: "I can't guess. Tell me."

"One is," said the sculptor, "that I am so cynical and morbid that I should only make you more low-spirited, and the other—well, I should want more than friendship has to offer."

As soon as he had uttered these words he cursed his recklessness. Their effect on

Althea was intense. A wave of color swept over her face, and was succeeded by a pathetic pallor. Her bosom heaved. What was there to answer? At such moments an impulsive woman who loves must make a superhuman effort at self-control, or break down and betray herself.

Which course Althea was about to take remained a mystery, for at the very moment that she was trying to frame a reply, Oliver North entered.

He seemed in a good humor, and greeted Moorlake warmly.

"Are you dining out to-night?" he asked, presently.

Moorlake replied that he was not.

"Come to us at eight, if you'll excuse such an informal invitation," said North. "I know you are hard to catch. Bertie Vincent and his wife are coming. You will second the invitation, won't you, Althea?" turning to his wife. She was feverishly

flushed, but Oliver's careless eye did not observe the fact.

"Oh, yes, of course. I should like it immensely," she said at once. Her eyes encountered Moorlake's.

"May I really?" he asked, almost with eagerness.

"Certainly," she said, smiling. "Do come."

"Many thanks," he answered, recovering his conventional tone, which seldom deserted him. Then, rising, "I have another call to make," he added, "and must get back to Chelsea to dress, and also to tell my mother that I'm dining out."

He shook hands with the Norths, and Oliver accompanied him downstairs, talking agreeably all the way.

Althea's mind was in a tumult as she dressed for dinner. Cold-blooded, reasonable women may consider as preposterous the idea of a woman falling in love on short acquaintance

and without great encouragement. But these virtuous critics must make large allowance for temperament and circumstances. Althea's unhappiness was not merely passive. Her husband's presence acted like a moral blister. A rankling sense of wrong and injustice inflicted on her during a term of years incensed her constantly against him. She had no illusions left in regard to him. She knew that she never could be even comfortable or peaceful with him again. From the very beginning, from her first glimpse of Clement Moorlake, he had taken hold of her imagination. There was a great void in her life waiting to be filled, and to her it seemed that he, of all men, could best fill it. The words that he had allowed to escape his disciplined lips to-day set her very soul on fire. She did not realize—as many naturally pure women do not—what is involved in a great passion; that no matter how large the spiritual element in it may be,

there is the insistent clamoring of the earthly nature which will always make itself heard.

To her Moorlake was a hero of romance—perfect, without insipidity. She saw only the first steps of the path on which she had set her feet, and they seemed to lead upward. Women can go on much longer than men ignoring the bare facts of passion, or they can more easily wreathe them about with the garlands of sentiment. When the flowers wither and fall off they are sorry, startled, and even surprised.

At the same time that Althea was standing in the glare of electric light, mechanically preparing for her next meeting with Moorlake, he was steeped in a poignant sense of what he had done. The habit of reticence, which he had painfully cultivated now for many years, had suddenly failed him. He could not help knowing from experience—though neither a cad nor a coxcomb—that his

personality had extraordinary power over women. Being that rare animal, an honorable and conscientious man, he had tried not to influence them in the slightest degree. He was liberally endowed with every quality that goes to make a successful flirt; but his conscience, no less than his distaste for such conquests, stood in the way of his being one. It is astonishing how many men, who are otherwise gentlemen, do not hesitate to make love to their neighbors' wives, and having done so fall to a lower depth of dishonor—that of failing to abide by the result.

If there was one thing Clement abhorred more than another it was the slightest shade of duplicity in a man's relations with women. He could understand—being a man, not an angel—that there might be circumstances under which you might have the misfortune to love your neighbor's wife. But if you did, and should in any way compromise the lady, it was inconceivable that you should

not stand by her before the world. His opinion was that a man ought to consider long and carefully before entering on an *affaire* with a woman ; but that, having once decided to enter, he could not honorably draw back.

To be sure, the few words that had escaped him to-day would have meant to some women nothing at all. But he knew that Althea was different ; he could see that she waited thirstily for every sign of friendship and affection—that she would treasure every utterance of his like an evangel.

It was this knowledge that made him feel deeply responsible. Naturally enough, he was not absolutely invulnerable. Though he always told himself that the best part of his nature was dead, there was still left much that was emotional. No man can be constantly appealed to by a charming, devoted woman without being in danger of responding to her ; and with a kind, chival-

rous man there is always the subtle temptation to make the woman happy with such love as he still has to offer, rather than to mortify her by a repulse, no matter how gentle.

Moorlake was shocked to find that he could not at once adjust his social armor. The "horse chestnut shell" of reserve, laughingly alluded to by Althea in a former conversation, would not fit to-night. "After all, what a bother life is!" he thought. "Men and women are natural enemies; where the sex question once enters into anything, all peace and pleasure are at an end."

He scarcely knew the state of his own mind as he rolled along in a humble brown 'bus to Pont street. When he saw Althea his trouble deepened. Her eyes said, "What next?" There was feverish joy in them—intense expectancy. Fortunately, the Vincents and North were in the room;

his conventional manner—" priggish," Nellie Vincent called it—soon returned to him.

Althea was in the midst of a tempest, moral and physical, which rendered her quite incapable of judging what impression she was producing. She saw Nellie regarding her with unusual interest. She was afraid to look at Clement, who sat beside her, and she ostentatiously talked with Bertie Vincent on the other side. She felt guilty. Though so little had happened—nothing, in fact—the world seemed changed. She was so absurdly ignorant of men that she fancied a stray, careless phrase from the man she loved was going to alter the universe.

She had had no experience of the creatures who are all flames and darts to-day and all indifference and contempt to-morrow. Clement was a good man ; but the good and the bad are singularly alike when it comes to dealings with their natural dupes. They both make love and are both soon sorry ; only

the good ones pity the women, while the bad ones are sorry only for themselves.

Oliver North was a very charming host when nothing had happened to cross him. He was far from being deficient in brains, and this evening he was unusually entertaining. He liked the Vincents sincerely, and seemed to have forgotten that he was ever potentially jealous of Moorlake. Conversation flowed smoothly on.

Moorlake remarked that Althea was not at ease in the presence of her husband. He guessed that North had a way of taking her to task, when they were left alone, for everything she had said. Such a practice soon freezes the most spontaneous woman. There was at times a cutting tone in North's voice when he addressed his wife, a sort of sardonic humor in his allusions to her, which quite explained her want of ease. Between her wish to please Clement and her fear of offending Oliver, Althea's ordeal was a trying

one. North was the kind of man who could not let even a culinary failure go unnoticed. He would pause in the midst of a story of mountain-climbing—one of his hobbies—to observe that the bread sauce was like a poultice. This evening he fell foul of the salad dressing.

Althea pressed her hands together in a sort of small nervous panic.

"I'm *so* sorry!" she said; "I ought to have made it myself."

"My wife," said North, addressing the company in general, "believes in doing nothing herself which she can get done for her. Hence this excess of vinegar."

"I thought the salad particularly nice," said Bertie.

"That's right!—flatter Althea. She thrives on flattery. You see, only the husband has the courage to tell her of her faults."

"That makes one glad that England is not a polyandrous country," said Nellie.

"'Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful,'" quoted Bertie. "Give me an enemy every time."

"But let me choose my enemy, if he has to kiss me!" laughed Nellie.

Althea said nothing; she felt the pity in Moorlake's eyes. The salad-dressing incident was unimportant in itself, but it was a text from which her whole married life might have been preached.

After dinner North's humor changed and he became affable again.

Bertie sat down to the piano, and Nellie led North into the far end of the room to look at some new photographs, with the kind intent to leave Althea and Clement together. They were for some minutes speechless. Althea sat stiff and upright like an automaton, her cheeks burning—a poor, unhappy creature who had been pitchforked by fate into the wrong environment, or placed by Providence in a hard primary school, accord-

ing as one inclines to the pagan or the Christian theory of life. Moorlake was thinking how he pitied her—how, with scarcely a throb of his lower nature, he could find it in his heart to shelter her in his arms. She inwardly palpitated with what she scarcely recognized yet as an immense love.

Bertie began singing. He had a lovely tenor voice, which he made light of, as of his other gifts. The second verse of his song—one of the perfect love songs of the world—became thrilling as he sang it—he, the happy married man with no yearnings for a change of lot. The eternal, passionate unrest that is in the heart of every artist—writer, singer, player—burst out in the lines :

*" Wenn du mich liebst so wie ich dich,*
*Soll ich dein eigen sein—*
*Heiss wie der Stahl und fest wie der Stein*
*Soll deine Liebe sein."*

" Do you know German ?" whispered Althea.

"Enough to understand," said Clement.

Bertie went on and plunged into Grieg's "*Ich Liebe Dich*"—and how much Grieg has to answer for is known to all those who have heard that song sung as it should be. Clement lost himself in the music.

It was not he, but somebody else in temporary possession of his body, who leaned over to Althea and said :

"You have never been to my studio. Won't you come to tea with me one day this week ?"

She looked at him and answered, without hesitation, swiftly and softly :

"Thank you. Tuesday ?"

"Yes ; about five."

" I will come."

Nellie came back from the corner with the photographs, but the word was spoken and the hour of fate had struck.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONFESSION

TUESDAY arrived in due course, for good or ill. As the hour of five approached Moorlake was restless. He wanted to smoke, but would not, lest the atmosphere should be contaminated by the fumes of tobacco. He wished Mrs. North to find everything as fresh and charming as possible. He had arranged some flowers with his own hands ; a row of small glasses full of violets stood on the high, carved mantel-piece and a cluster of long-stemmed pink roses made a delicious spot of color on the table. A fire of logs was crackling in a hearth of De Morgan tiles, diffusing a faint acrid perfume through the great room. There were red-shaded lamps burning. Moorlake hated electric light, and

used it only in the adjoining room, where he worked. The so-called studio was really a combination of library and sitting-room, where he spent his leisure hours at home and occasionally entertained his friends.

To-day he was more nervous and expectant than he had been for years. He was surprised at his state of mind. He desired Mrs. North's presence, and yet dreaded it. He asked which of the two warring personalities in his nature was to have the upper hand—the gentleman or the scoundrel.

He realized that what was outwardly a friendly, casual visit and an ordinary tea-drinking was perhaps to be the turning-point in his relations with Althea; and he swore to himself that he would say and do nothing that could render her more unhappy in the long run.

At a quarter to five the bell rang.

In a few moments the servant entered and asked if he would see Mrs. Hilyer.

Moorlake was intensely annoyed, but did not dare to refuse.

"Mrs. Hilyer knows that I'm at home?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said the maid.

"Ask her to come up," he said.

Mrs. Hilyer entered almost directly. In the subdued light her small, pretty face looked pale—perhaps also because it stood out against a high collar of dark fur.

"Am I interrupting you?" she asked, holding out her hand.

"No," said Moorlake, with cold civility; "I seldom work after dark. Won't you sit down?" and he drew a chair toward the fire.

"Not yet—I want to look about first. What a room for a dance!—but you ought to have electric light."

"I don't care for dancing, you know."

"Perhaps your friends might!"

"I am not an altruistic person, I'm afraid."

"How selfish men are!"

Clarice was frozen by his manner—by the invulnerability of the armor in which she had never been able to find a crevice.

Moorlake was averse to rudeness, but he feared intensely to make her prolong her visit.

"How does the room compare with my Roman studio?" he asked, more pleasantly, while he strained his ears for the sound of wheels or the tinkle of a door-bell.

"It is very nice, so far as I can see in this dim, religious light. Ah, violets!" and she daintily sniffed the warm air. "I believe you are expecting someone to tea!"

"My mother sometimes has tea with me here," said Clement. "You know she lives with me." He could not help smiling at his own words.

Clarice laughed.

"How funny you are! And yet you haven't much sense of humor," she said.

"Perhaps that's why I am amusing to my friends," said he. "Yes, I suppose I'm a very dull, humdrum sort of person."

"You don't look it!" and Clarice fixed her penetrating eyes on his face. "You appear at this moment to be in a fever of expectation—or annoyance. Which is it? You have a beautiful red spot in the middle of each cheek. Never saw you with a color before. It makes you look years younger."

At any other time her impertinence would have entertained him, but just now, when his heart was in his ears, he had scarcely a thought for her.

"I will have pity on you," she went on, "and leave you. I came really to know whether you would dine with me to-morrow night and go to the play. I've got a box at the Lyceum."

"You are very kind," said Moorlake, "but I am engaged."

Clarice rose.

"Too bad!" she said, and at that moment the bell rang. "Ah! There comes the unknown she! I must fly! I'm afraid we shall meet in the hall!" and with a light laugh Mrs. Hilyer left the room, without further leave-taking.

Moorlake was intensely annoyed. Before he could collect his thoughts the maid announced Mrs. North. She came toward him in great trepidation.

"Oh, I'm so vexed!" she exclaimed, as he took her hand. "I ran against Mrs. Hilyer on the stairs. What will she think?"

"What could she think except that you kindly stepped in to see me, as she did?" said Clement, reassuringly. "You know quite well that if there were any harm in your coming here I should not have invited you. I didn't like to tell my maid not to let in anyone but you; servants gossip so."

"And is she used to this sort of thing?—your having women to tea, I mean?" asked

Althea, looking about her vaguely, not yet recovered from her perturbation.

"I don't have many," said Clement, smiling at the unconscious little note of jealousy in her question. "But there are enough visitors at the house to make your call quite ordinary."

"Not to you, I hope," said Althea, with a timid but bright smile.

He pressed her hand for an instant.

"Give me your cape, and take this chair," he said, taking her wrap from her.

"How pretty it is here! And the flowers —so fresh and sweet! Did you get them because of me?"

He could hardly bear the look in her eyes as she turned to him—an expression of pure worship and trust.

"How good and thoughtful you are to me!" she went on. "I never knew that men could be like that till I met you."

She was not in a condition of mind to

weigh her words. Moorlake saw this, and had to fight down his own rising passion—a passion compounded more of pity than of love.

"How often must I tell you that I'm no better than other men?" he said, gently.

"You can't make me believe it!" she said. "You're the first man who has ever brought me any happiness."

Her sweet face was turned toward him in the firelight, her eager, shining eyes were fixed on his.

"Any man who could knowingly make you unhappy can't be worth much!" said he, impulsively, forgetting that he was condemning her husband.

Just then the maid entered with tea, and the conversation became, perforce, conventional. When she had left the room Althea said: "I made up my mind not to tell you my troubles to-day. I want to rest here, and forget."

"Would it make you happier to tell them? Could I help you?" he asked. "I have known since our first meeting that you were unhappy, but you have never told me why."

"But you know! you feel! You've seen me with Oliver; how could you not know?" she said. "I don't know how I can bear my life. "I don't want to be disloyal, though the time for loyalty seems gone. He has thrown me away."

"Poor man!" said Moorlake.

"You pity him?" asked Althea, amazed.

"I pity any man, however unworthy, who has lost your love."

Althea flushed deeply.

"He never had my love!—such love as I am capable of now. Listen. Let me tell you the truth—a part of the truth. I've come to-day because I couldn't help it. I wanted so much to see you alone—away from the shams of society, away from the jealous espionage of the man who grudges

me even my friendships. I've got to the point where I can't go on without support. The struggle is awful. You've seen me with him—you know. It's sinful for me to live with him any longer. Even for the sake of the child I can't. I hate the sound of his voice—the touch of his hand. I must get free. I shall go mad if I don't!"

She was trembling with violent emotion. Moorlake was scarcely less stirred. He took her hand in both his own and bent over her. "Althea!" he said. "My heart aches for you!"

She went on, wildly: "He has crushed me gradually, year after year. He has killed my spirit—stolen my youth—broken my heart! My life is dust and ashes. People call him a good man; so he is, without a vice—only the vices of the slave-driver and the torturer. I clung to him for years, and he has unclasped my fingers one by one! If he would strike me I could leave

him ; if he were unfaithful I should be free to live my own life. But he is only cruel—cruel."

She broke down utterly now and wept.

Moorlake knelt beside her and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"My dear, my dear!" he said, his voice vibrating with feeling, "I can't watch you cry like this!"

For a few moments she clung to him silently, while her sobs moderated. Her face was buried in her hands. His touch seemed an anodyne for all suffering.

"Forgive me," she said, weakly; "I'm so unstrung." She reached out one hand and laid it lightly on the side of his face.

His heart throbbed wildly.

"I long to take you in my arms and shield you against the world!" he said, very low. "But the shield would be but a target to invite the arrows of the world!"

He was holding himself back with the

full force of his strong will. Her instinctive caress had shaken him sorely.

"I know—I know," she said. "But there is still friendship. You have said that there is no middle course, but that is not so. I can't hide from you how much you are to me ; I don't feel any shame—why should I be ashamed to love what is high and noble ? I never dreamed that you could care for me much, but I *know* you are my friend. Aren't you ? You like me ?"

She was not touching him now, but her eyes were probing his own.

"My dear," he answered, "I like you only too well."

"Then we can have a friendship," she said, triumphantly—"a beautiful secret compact—a bond too sacred to be made known to any but ourselves. I will make our love so high and pure and stainless that God himself could not chide us for it. Isn't it possible ?"

"A dream, dear child," he said, sadly—"a beautiful dream."

"Only a dream?" she answered, eagerly. "You hinted once that there had been for years a woman in your life—a love that made all other love impossible. I don't ask to know where she is—whether she be alive or dead; I ask only the second place. To be second in your heart would be happiness enough for me. Ah, do you despise me? Am I unwomanly?"

"Despise you?" he cried. "Despise you, my child? Is it nothing that such a woman as you cares for me? Is it nothing that you awaken feelings that I thought were dead? I can't have your beautiful friendship; I've told you, warned you, that you mustn't trust me. I should only injure you—make your life harder than it is, believe me."

She hid her face once more.

"You *do* despise me," she said, chokingly; "you *do!*"

"So little," he answered, "that I wish to God I were a different man and you a free woman. Two things hold us apart, the power of the past and my affection for you. I can't offer you anything that won't be an insult to you."

She looked up with a white face.

"Ah," she said, "you don't love me!"

"I care so much for you," he said, "that I won't sacrifice you."

"You don't understand me yet," Althea protested. "You won't understand me. I swear that I want to be your friend—to see you sometimes—to have in my heart the knowledge that one man cares for me—that I care for and believe in one man."

"I do understand you," he said, sadly. "I recognize your purity, and I realize that I am—a man."

"But such a man!" she said; "so much higher and nobler——"

"An ordinary man," said Moorlake, "who

tries not to be a blackguard. It isn't always easy. Don't think it's easy."

She looked at his pale, stern face.

"Oh, I love you for it!" she cried. There was a kind of radiance in her regard. "I'm not ashamed; I'm proud that I love the best man I've ever known."

She turned away from him and walked toward the dim end of the room.

He stood by the fire, looking blindly down at the flames. His mind was in a whirl.

In a few moments Althea returned and stood beside him. They faced each other.

"So this is the end?" she said, quietly.

"Of what?" he asked, knowing her meaning, yet wishing to gain time.

"Of our friendship—our love—what you please to call it," she replied.

"I know no other course," he said.

She did not know what the answer cost him.

"We shall never meet again? I have spoiled it all—all the hope I had," she said, wearily.

"For a time—for a time," he murmured. "Let us not meet for a little while."

"It must be so, if you say it. Will you kiss me once, Clement—for good-bye?"

His breast heaved. He was less calm than she, for she was learning what despair means.

He took her in his arms; she raised her mouth to his.

And at that moment the door opened, and Oliver North stood on the threshold.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A TRAGEDY

FOR several seconds no one spoke.

Althea clung to Moorlake's arm, and after the first involuntary cringe faced her husband boldly. North's face was white in the dim light, and set in an expression of restrained fury.

"So," he said, presently, "she was right. You are here with your lover!"

"He is not my lover," said Althea, in a weak voice. She was trembling, but she did not flinch.

"That is for him to explain to me," said North, with a black scowl. He made a step nearer. Althea threw herself before Moorlake.

"Don't touch him! Don't dare!" she

cried. "He's too good for you to touch!" Then she turned to Clement. "Leave me with him; he shall hear the truth from me."

"I can't leave you," said Moorlake. "Let me speak to your husband." His whole anxiety seemed for her—not for anything that might happen to himself.

"I implore you!" she said, and pointed to the door.

Moorlake turned to North. "I will come back when you want me," he said.

North's eyes were fixed on Althea.

"My business is with her. Time enough to settle with you," he answered. He glanced at Clement as he left the room, then turned on his wife with a face fearful in its bitter anger.

"Well," he said, "you shameless woman, what have you to say? How long have you been deceiving me with this scoundrel?"

Althea, though blanched, gathered firmness every moment.

"I deceived you!" she said. "I have treated you like a gentleman when you were insulting me with every breath! I have stayed quietly in your house while you made my home a hell; but from this moment I'll deceive you no longer—I hate you! I hate you! You have done all you could to drive me to dishonor; but I am innocent. Clement Moorlake is a man to die for—but he doesn't love me. Why should he? But I'm not ashamed of loving him—and I do—I do! Wouldn't any poor, crushed, broken-hearted woman love the best man she's ever known?" She paused a moment, panting.

"You confess to me that you love him?" cried North, with concentrated rage, "and you say he isn't your lover? A likely story! Does an innocent woman go to a man's rooms alone and kiss him? You ask me to believe that?"

"I asked him to kiss me—because we

were never to meet again," said Althea. "Would to God he did love me—but he doesn't."

North snarled inarticulately and half-raised his arm.

"Strike me," she said, "and make me free of you forever! But I tell you, if you hurt Clement I'll kill you—kill you with my naked hands."

"You a decent woman?" he cried. "You're low and vile! If you're not his mistress you ought to be! Stay here till you make him love you! I wouldn't soil my hands with either of you. There are other ways of punishing a woman like you." He seized her by the shoulders, dashed her to the floor and strode from the room.

Moorlake was in the inner room. He heard the fall, and hurried to Althea's assistance. By that time the frenzied North had left the house, banging the door behind him.

Althea's head had struck against the table, and she was half-stunned.

Moorlake knelt and raised her head till it rested on his arm. There were signs of returning consciousness, and at that moment Mrs. Moorlake entered. The stately old lady, white-haired and with eyes like Clement's, stood looking at her son and Althea with a startled gaze.

"What is this, Clement? Who is it?" she asked, sternly.

"Mrs. North is ill, mother. Will you ring for your maid, please?" said Moorlake, softly.

Althea's eyelids fluttered, and she feebly raised her hand to her head.

"Oh!" she murmured, "we are not alone. Let me get up."

"Are you able?" asked Clement. "Perhaps, mother, you would better not ring. Mrs. North is recovering."

Althea got up slowly, swaying slightly as she regained her feet.

"I must go," she said, faintly. All her force was gone.

"Will you take my carriage?" asked Mrs. Moorlake, stiffly. "It is waiting still."

"Thank you, I will go home. Oh!" she wailed, suddenly, "I *have* no home."

Mrs. Moorlake looked shocked and surprised.

"You are ill," she said. "Let me send my maid with you."

"I will take Mrs. North," said Moorlake, firmly. He placed Althea's cape about her shoulders. "I will take you to Mrs. Vincent's," he said to her in a low tone; "but you must first have a glass of wine." He made her sit down. "Perhaps I'd better fetch the wine myself. You will stay here, mother," he said. "I will see that Mrs. North reaches home safely."

He was gone only a minute or two. Mrs. Moorlake said nothing; she saw that Althea was dazed and unequal to conversation.

Clement returned with a glass of port. Althea drank it submissively, and revived a little. He led her from the room and down the stairs like a child. The hall was empty, and they got into the carriage without being seen by anyone but the coachman.

"Lean on me, dear," he said, gently, and she put her head against his shoulder.

Her mind was torpid. Everything seemed wrapped in a haze. She knew that she was touching Clement—that he was supporting her, as a father might. The contact gave her no thrill—only a dull sense that she was being cared for, and that he was a tower of strength. They reached Campden Hill in silence. He left her in the carriage and went in to prepare Nellie Vincent. She was just going upstairs to dress for dinner, but greeted him with her usual cordiality.

"Mrs. North is in the carriage," he said; "she needs you very much. There has been a terrible scene with North—she has

had a blow, and can't talk much. You'll be good to her, won't you ?" He said this holding Nellie's hand. She had never seen him so white and agitated.

" Clement ! tell me more. What does this mean ? " she cried.

" Much to both of us, I fear," he answered. " She will tell you when she is better ; but we must not keep her waiting."

Together they went out to the carriage and brought Althea in.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE HUSBAND'S FLIGHT

On some nervous temperaments a sudden shock produces a succeeding torpor of body and brain. When Althea found herself in her friend's boudoir her one desire was to sleep. She had no other craving left. Nothing seemed to matter. The great crisis of her life, through which she had just passed, had little significance for her. She had let Moorlake go without a word; she had not even thanked him.

"Let me sleep, Nellie," she said, when Mrs. Vincent questioned her. "Something awful has happened—Oliver—Clement—it's all confused. Don't ask me till to-morrow."

Nellie had the sense to see that she must not try to learn anything to-night. She

herself helped Althea to undress, induced her to drink a cup of tea, and got her into bed. She lighted the fire already laid, then, returning to her own room, rang for the housemaid and explained that Mrs. North had been taken ill while calling, and must not be disturbed.

Nellie's own confidential maid had fetched the tea, and could be trusted not to gossip in the servants' hall.

Nellie had barely time to slip on a tea gown when dinner was announced. Bertram Vincent was waiting for her when she entered the drawing-room. He stood before the fire, whistling blithely to himself.

"Bertie," said Nellie, coming quickly toward him, "something awful has happened," and in a few words she told all she knew.

Vincent whistled again, this time with a changed note.

"Clement!" he exclaimed. "Well, I'm blowed!"

"Yes, Clement! of all people!" said Nellie. "Come; we must behave as usual."

"After all, it's our servants who keep us straight," said Bertie, with a sudden smile. It tickled his sense of humor that he and his wife must talk commonplace, and eat clear soup while poor, ruined, sick-hearted Althea lay in a half-stupor upstairs—and meanwhile the demure parlor-maid, under her spotless cap with streamers, held the distinct impression of the bruise she had seen on Mrs. North's face.

At last dessert came, and the maid departed. Wild with impatience, Nellie jumped up.

"Parkins is on guard, Bertie; she won't let the others in. But I'm going up. Oh, poor Althea! What do you think it is?"

"An infernal muddle, no doubt. Why did Althea go to Clement's alone?"

"Why, many people do. I do."

"I know, but that's different. We've

known Moorlake twenty years, and then, *I* am not Oliver North."

"No, thank God!"

Bertie reflected for a moment.

"Will they fight, do you think?" asked Nellie. "*Do* men have duels in England?"

"More likely, if there's anything in it, North will shoot 'em both!" said Bertie. "Do you remember that unfortunate dinner last Summer, when they met? It was in this very room that Oliver gave vent to his opinion on faithless wives. He won't give much quarter, I expect."

Nellie was half-crying.

"Whatever she's done it's his fault—the brute!" she said, vehemently.

"But Moorlake, of all men!" said Vincent, wonderingly, as his wife left him.

The night seemed short to Althea. Her sleep was deep and dreamless. When she woke the dim Winter light barely made the room visible. She looked idly at the bed

curtains, noted the pattern, and realized that they were not her own. By the time she sat up and looked at the other objects in the room, Nellie, who had slept on the sofa all night, entered fresh from her bath and morning coffee.

"Well, dearest," she said, trying to keep her voice steady, "you've had a splendid sleep! You must be hungry. You shall have breakfast at once. How do you feel, love?"

"My head aches a little," said Althea. "I think I am rather hungry." Then, with sudden excitement, "Nellie, why am I here?"

"You were ill, dear—and Clement—that is—I—you were so tired—" Nellie came to a standstill.

A wave of recollection broke over Althea.

"Oh, Nellie! Nellie! I remember! Clement! is he safe? Where is he? *Where*

is Oliver ?" She clasped her hands tightly and fixed imploring eyes on her friend.

"Safe ? Of course. Why not ?" said Nellie. "He's big enough to take care of himself, isn't he, dear ?"

The tragedy in Althea's face frightened her into an attempt at playfulness.

"You don't know," said Althea. "I was stupid last night—I hurt my face—or head—when Oliver threw me down."

She began to cry weakly.

"My dear," implored Nellie, her own eyes wet, "you mustn't ! Lie down. Be good, love. Let me bring you some breakfast. Sarah will make a fire, and your own Nellie, who loves you, will take care of you. Don't, don't, that's a love !"

The childless woman crooned over her like a mother with a baby.

She was quieted for the time.

The blazing coals were comforting and cheering, and made one forget the yellow

day outside. Nature asserted herself, and Althea was really glad to eat and drink. Life looks so different after breakfast! She was then able to tell Mrs. Vincent all. When the story was ended, Nellie sat beside the bed, silent.

"Do you hate me, Nell, for being so wicked?" asked Althea, timidly.

"I hate Oliver!" said Nellie. "No one else. But I think Moorlake should not have let it come to this."

"Oh, it wasn't his fault! He is the best—the——"

"I know—I know. They always are! I've known Moorlake twenty years, and I thought him the only sensible *attractive* man of my acquaintance—it's easy for the other kind to be sensible. I'm disappointed in him."

Althea shook her head on the pillow.

"You've known him twenty years, but you don't know him as I do," she said.

"Possibly not in just that way," said

Nellie, dryly. Then, presently: "Althea, does he love you?"

Althea winced piteously.

"Not as I do him," she said.

"There was that other woman—" began Nellie.

Althea raised her hand.

"Don't tell me!" she cried. "If he wants me to know he'll tell me himself!"

"I can't tell you, for I don't know anything. Clement's as close as wax. I only know that it is generally understood that he has loved one woman all his life. She may be dead—I don't know."

There was a short silence. The firelight flickered cosily on the rose-pink walls and the flowery hangings. Both women were deep in thought.

"Nellie," said Althea, presently, "will Oliver try to kill me—or Clement?"

"I sha'n't let him kill you, dear!" said Nellie. "Moorlake must defend himself."

"It would be awful to die so—" Althea shuddered a little—"and for such a little sin!"

"It would be a large price to pay for one kiss," said Nellie, cynically. "Well, well, we must think what's to be done. Bertie had better go to your house. He can manage Oliver."

"Oh, Nellie, my child! my poor baby! How wicked I am! Isn't it terrible that I've loved *him* so much that I've almost forgotten Violet! Oh, Nellie!" and she began to cry afresh.

When she was once more soothed Mrs. Vincent left her and went to confer with Bertie.

"You must go at once to the Norths'!" she said. "You'll be able to find out what sort of mood Oliver is in, and see how Violet is, too. Althea is fretting about her."

Bertie made a small grimace.

"Pleasant mission for a fellow who hates scenes!" he said; but he went.

When Nellie returned to her friend she found her with a new idea.

"Something has flashed across me!" she exclaimed. "When Oliver came in yesterday he said: 'She was right! You *are* with your lover!' Now, 'she' must be Clarice Hilyer. I forgot to tell you that I met her in the hall."

Nellie Vincent threw up her hands.

"Good Lord! Then you *are* lost!" she cried. "That woman will hound you to destruction. Why, she's been after Moorlake for years. Oh, Althea, you silly baby, *why* did you go there?"

"Because I was mad," said Mrs. North, gloomily.

When Bertram Vincent arrived in Pont street he was met by a solemn-faced maid at the door.

"Is Mr. North at home, Alice?" he asked. He knew her well.

"No, sir."

"Miss Violet, then?"

"No, sir."

"I came to tell you where Mrs. North is; I thought you might be worried about her. She was taken faint yesterday while driving on Campden Hill—came to us, and Mrs. Vincent is taking good care of her."

Alice's calm broke up.

"Come in, sir, please," she said, with a sob. "There's no good in keepin' the truth from you, sir, you as knows us all so well, sir. Mr. North's gone—that's the truth; went off last night, ragin'-like, and—and he's taken Miss Violet."

"Taken Miss Violet!" cried Vincent, aghast. "Where to, in heaven's name?"

"That's what we don't know, sir. And he's gone without nurse, and the poor woman is near crazy. He come in about six

o'clock yesterday like a wild man. 'Send cook to me,' says he, and tell nurse to get Miss Violet ready to travel—to pack her clothes as fast as she can.' 'For 'ow long, sir?' I says, very respectful—for he was glarin'. 'A year,' says he—'two years! Pack all her things, and be quick!' Cook come up all in a tremble. She told me he said to mind everything while he was away, till she heard from him, and he gave her a cheque for forty pounds for expenses, which looks bad, master being so close-fisted in general. 'And will the mistress be back, sir?' asks cook. 'Never!' says master, in an awful voice. 'She's dead,' says he. 'Oh, poor, dear lady!' cries cook. We all loves Mrs. North, y' know, sir. 'How did she die?' says cook. 'She killed herself—and me,' he says, wild-like. Well, you know, sir, that couldn't be true, because Mr. North wasn't a bit dead himself, only storm-in' around cruel. So we plucked up spirit,

sir, and—and—here we are," she ended, lamely.

These were the tidings that Vincent had to carry back to Campden Hill.

## CHAPTER X

### A LOVER'S DILEMMA

THE next day Moorlake called at the Vincents' to inquire for Althea. Nellie came to ask if she would like to see him.

Althea was sitting huddled up in a great chair before the morning-room fire. She had scarcely stirred or spoken all day. At the mention of Clement's name a wave of color swept over her face.

"No, no! I can't see him!" she said.

"You will have to see him sooner or later," said Nellie. "He will come again and again until you do. Why not now?"

"I can't," said Althea, and that was all she would say. As soon, however, as Nellie left the room she was in a fever. Oh,

to see him—just a glimpse! Oh, to hear him—one tone of his voice!

The apathy of the past few hours changed to a consuming hunger for his presence. Yet, she thought, of what use was his coming? If he had not loved her before he would despise her now—when she had led him into a position so hateful to a man of honor. He had never loved her—she knew that; only felt a great pity, a great kindness, a great regret that so much love should have been given unsought, undesired. Some men would have played with the passion; would have extracted thrills and sensations from it, while their souls held aloof. She thanked God that Moorlake was better than that, and she realized, amid the pangs of a most human craving, that it was better to preserve one's ideal than to have a surfeit of mock love.

The knowledge that he was so near, yet invisible, inaudible to her, made her long to

go to him. But the awe in which she held him—now more than ever—kept her where she was, and would not let her go.

In a little while, though the time seemed long, Nellie Vincent returned to the morning-room. She sat down by Althea, seeing the eager question of her eyes.

"He is very sad, very troubled, Althea," she said. "He did not say much—only asked about you, whether you had any plans, and how you were."

"Did you say anything about Violet?" asked Althea, in a weak voice.

"Bertie told him. He was awfully shocked."

"Did he speak of seeing me?"

"He only said, 'If I can be of any use, let me know.'"

"And how did he look?"

"Pale—and older."

"Oh, Clement! Clement!" Althea covered her face with her hands. "I who

would die for him have brought him only trouble."

Nellie did not answer; she only held her friend's hand and patted it.

Her mind was fixed on the near future, and the prospect was a disquieting one. How was Althea to regain her child? How was a scandal to be averted? Sooner or later something must transpire. It was likely that Clarice Hilyer would be glad to injure the woman of whom she had suddenly become jealous. Besides all this, Althea's financial position was insecure. She had now but a trifle to live on, as evidently part of Oliver's scheme of revenge was to leave her without means of support.

"It would have been kinder to shoot her," said Nellie to Bertie next day.

"I can't see what she's to do," admitted Bertie. "I saw Ballard, the American lawyer, this morning. He tells me that Althea can't get the child unless she could get

someone to steal it, and we don't even know where it is. Who knows what North is doing? He may be getting a divorce—or rather, he may do so when he arrives, for I suppose he is gone to America."

"How can he do that? He has no grounds," said Nellie.

"You don't know American law, my dear," answered Vincent. "Ballard tells me that a man can go to Dakota, live there ninety days, start divorce proceedings of which his wife is perfectly ignorant; the case 'goes by default,' as they call it, and the wife has papers served on her simply informing her that she's divorced. That may happen to Althea."

"Heavens, what a wicked law!" cried Nellie. "And could Clement marry her?"

"That I am not quite certain of. Ballard left me before we got to that. Do you think Clement wants to marry her?"

Nellie was silent for a moment. Then she said: "I think he would feel it his duty."

"Althea wouldn't take him on those terms. She's too proud," said Bertie.

"My dear," said Nellie, "when a woman worships a man as Althea worships Moorlake, she takes him on any terms—especially if they're respectable ones."

"Well," said Bertie, "we shall see. . . ."

No one besides the Vincents and Moorlake could account for North's sudden absence—except Clarice Hilyer, who had made the mischief. She needed all her coolness when she thought of meeting Moorlake as she might do any day. She found herself afraid to pass his door ; every day she stood on her doorstep before going out, nervously looking up and down Cheyne Walk, dreading to see his tall figure. She knew that to inflict further injury on Althea North would be to lose Clement even as an acquaintance, and she preserved an unbroken silence. She never did harm to any woman unless that woman stood in her way ; and even

then her hatred was impersonal and calm, scarcely deserving the name of a passion.

Mrs. Moorlake understood her son's temper and character too well to question him in regard to the scene in the studio. Clement was a man who scrupulously guarded his individual rights of thought and action. His mother's unyielding dignity had been reproduced in him. He gave no one the right to question him, and she had always respected his reticence. In so doing she made it possible for them to live together in harmony. Mrs. Moorlake had never before entered his studio without an invitation, and she blamed herself for having done so on this occasion.

As for Clement, he found the work of years undone in an instant. He had strenuously—perhaps priggishly—protected himself against the charm of women, only to find himself in the odious position of a man accused of a sin he has not committed—branded as a

seducer, while he has almost attained to the renunciation of a saint. The temptation had been a fiery one, and he had come through it morally unscathed ; yet here he was, responsible for a woman's ruin. What though that ruin was imaginary ? It was real enough in the sense that her husband believed in it, and had left her in jealous fury. She was now dependent on three persons—the Vincents and himself—and of these three he was the only one who was morally responsible. His one poor, abortive, brotherly kiss had ended worse than the fiercest embrace. He would have found something ludicrous in the case had he not been the hero of it. His quickened fancy pictured the cheerless drama that might follow. He saw himself, for the rest of his life, charged with the fate of Althea North. She was pretty, she was charming ; she loved him, but—yes, that was it—she loved him too much. It was an entire reversal of the proper order of

things. His fine taste was offended by it. Now that he was away from Althea he felt astonishingly cold. There was none of the warmth that her sweetness and pretty, pleading ways evoked in him when they were together. He had been inexpressibly relieved when she refused to see him. He commended her discretion—a quality not always displayed by women who are madly in love. Yet he knew that the meeting must come, and the thought of it sat on him like a nightmare. One side of his nature hated the other. He *wanted* to love Althea. Tepid affection wasn't enough ; pity, and the kindness which every chivalrous man feels toward a nice woman, were not enough. He longed to rouse some emotion, some enthusiasm, in himself. His nature was like his face, where the cold, pure Grecian outlines were contradicted by the fire of the eyes ; and at present the coldness had it all its own way.

Meanwhile, Althea stayed on with the

Vincents. She went to Pont street one day to get her clothes and various belongings that she needed. The servants looked at her in an awestruck way, but they seemed full of affection for her and of stifled indignation toward Oliver. North's solicitor, Alice, the parlor-maid, said, had called two days before and had put the household on a different footing. All the maids but Alice and the cook had been paid a month's wages and sent away. The other two were ordered to remain on board wages until further instructions should be received. The drawing-room was dismantled, and its sheeted forms gave Althea a shock. The house was full of memories—most of them miserable ones. Violet's bedroom was more than she could bear. It brought back the hours that mother and child had spent together—the hours always the most satisfactory in a mother's life. Althea had thought then that she knew what maternal love was, but the throbbing wave of

affection that swelled over her now as she looked at the vacant crib made her past feelings seem lukewarm and feeble by comparison.

She kept down her sobs while she selected such garments as she needed and superintended the packing of them. One of the dresses was the pale mauve satin she had worn on the occasion of her first meeting with Moorlake—the meeting that was destined to alter her life. She scarcely knew whether she loved or hated it. She remembered how she had never had enough clothes. She had gone to America the wife of a comparatively rich man, and had felt herself shabby and ashamed before her old friends. Each garment had some painful association ; her life with Oliver had had little happiness.

She got away from the house of ghosts as soon as she could and drove back to Campden Hill. All the way she was occupied with wondering how she was to live—

whether she could not force Oliver to make some provision for her. The Vincents loved her, and she was devoted to them, but she could not live her whole life with them. She felt a consuming desire to get away from London, to know that there was no chance of seeing Clement—the one person whom she longed for—and dreaded. When she reached the Vincents' she went at once into the morning-room. The afternoon was gray and cheerless, darkening into evening. Even the glowing fire and the flowers, of which the vases were full, could not make the room bright. She stood looking about for Nellie, and saw Clement Moorlake standing by the window. The shock stopped her heart, then sent it bounding. Moorlake looked so tall and pale and grave that he somehow overpowered her. She did not even stretch out her hand to him ; she stood looking at him with wide eyes. It was Clement that spoke.

"I was waiting for Mrs. Vincent," he said, "But I am glad to have this opportunity of seeing you."

He realized that he was priggish and stilted —that he had said the wrong thing.

"I will tell Nellie," said Althea, mechanically, and moved toward the door.

Moorlake came a step nearer.

"No, no—don't, please. I want to see you."

Althea returned to the fire, and stood taking off her gloves. She could not keep her hands still.

"I cannot blame you," she said, "if you want never to see me again."

That was also the wrong thing to say, she thought. She should have kept the appealing tone out of her voice.

"That is impossible!" said Clement. He was fighting down his distaste for the situation—trying to warm over his sympathy, that had grown cold. "I want so much to tell

you—" He paused. What *did* he want to tell her? He was distinctly conscious that he wished to tell her nothing. Meanwhile she stood opposite him, with white, pathetic face. She had put down her gloves, and now drew the pins from her hat, and laid that aside. Then she smoothed the heavy masses of chestnut hair that had fallen over her ears.

Why couldn't he love her? Why couldn't he take her into his arms and comfort her? It seemed to him nobler now to pretend than to freeze the poor creature by an exhibition of the truth. Yet something held him back.

Althea found words before he could go on.

"I want to tell you, Mr. Moorlake," she said, "what an agony of remorse I've suffered for having brought you to this. I understand your position; don't think I imagine—anything that is not so. You must

not trouble about me. I have good friends who will do all they can for me."

In that moment he admired her. Some of the ice melted.

"Dear Mrs. North," he said, leaning toward her. "I want you to feel that I am your friend, though I have so far brought only unhappiness into your life. I have no words to express how I regret this. If I can help you in any way—" he paused, again at a loss.

Neither was sorry that Nellie Vincent at that moment opened the door and ended the abortive interview. When she saw Althea she started back, then hastily decided to behave naturally.

"I've kept you waiting, Clement," she said, "but I was helping Bertie in the studio."

Althea took up her hat and gloves. "Good-bye," she said, turning to Moorlake, then quietly left the room.

Nellie looked after her, then at Moorlake.

"Can you say nothing—do nothing?" she demanded. "That poor thing will go mad."

Moorlake's face became set and haughty, and his thin nostrils quivered.

"You needn't look like that, Clement," said Nellie. "I've known you twenty years, and I'm one of the women you can't intimidate. I'm as sorry for you as I can be, but Althea didn't get into this miserable mess all alone, and she's got to be helped. I'm always on the side of the women, you know. We're handicapped from the cradle to the grave."

Moorlake almost smiled at this outburst. He was very fond of Mrs. Vincent.

"My dear Nellie," he said, "I don't know how I looked at you—I only know how I feel, and nobody need envy me."

"Let me know how you feel, please," said Nellie. "You see, we're all accustomed to look on you as something holy and remote

—something on a marble pedestal. We've always expected you to do the right thing, and you've always done it, so far as we know. Now, all of a sudden, you've stepped down, and I naturally feel anxious to hear what you think about it. I can't think it's no business of mine. I love Althea North—she is my best friend—and at present I see ruin ahead of her—ruin without any compensation, apparently—that is, if you don't love her."

Moorlake was making a heroic effort to conquer his repugnance to personal conversation. It was indeed difficult to preserve the haughty pose with Nellie, the friend of his boyhood. Their relations had always been those cordial, unemotional ones that alone endure between women and men.

When he answered her his face wore an expression of unaffected kindness.

"I feel Mrs. North's position most keenly," he said. "It seems disloyal to be

discussing her behind her back. I'm sure, if she ever felt any admiration for me she must have lost it by now. I was a brute to her just now!"

"I was afraid of it!" cried Nellie. "Her poor face made me shiver, it was so wan and white! Do you know what you ought to have done? You should have simply taken her into your arms and told her you love her. I don't care whether you do or not. A lie like that will save a woman's reason sometimes. I'm not speaking in the interest of morality now. My heart simply bleeds for that girl. I've never entangled myself with any man—but then, mind you, *I* was never married to Oliver North!"

Moorlake regarded her with deep interest.

"You're a good woman, Nellie," he said, "and I'm a cold brute."

"Ah, my dear, the cold brutes are worse than the other kind when it comes to this. Here is this woman torturing herself, think-

ing she has lost your respect, as well as everything else, and you come and patronize her in a polite morning call . . . Oh, it's too much ; I'm ashamed of you ! "

Moorlake took his castigation meekly.

" Last time you met," Nellie went on, " she was in your arms. This time I dare say you didn't even shake hands with her. Oh, you men ! I know your Spanish hidalgo airs—without any Spanish warmth behind them ! I'm glad enough *I* was never in love with you ! "

" Don't spare me," said Moorlake, a faint flicker of amusement crossing his face. " You do me good. But come, now, granted that I'm a brute, a statue, a Spanish hidalgo —all these conflicting epithets—what do you think I ought to do ? Let us be practical."

" I think," said Nellie, " that you ought to bolster up her self-respect. Don't keep on telling her you don't love her—that you

kissed her because you were sorry for her. I'm sure you *did* tell her that—you look so guilty."

Moorlake smiled.

"I don't feel like laughing," he said, "but you are really very funny."

"I am seriously anxious about Althea's health. She is ill now—all the result of a few days' misery. How is she to live if she thinks you don't care for her? You must love her a little—now, don't you? Come, do tell me! Keep your offish ways for people who haven't known you for twenty years. I've never, in all that time, asked you an indiscreet question. Do answer just this one!"

"Nellie, there's no resisting you," said Moorlake. His hazel eyes looked very human—at last. "I hate talking about my feelings—I always have hated it; but you have a sort of right to know them now. I do—and I do not—love Althea. She attracts me,

of course ; I'm not the statue you think me ; I care for her, in a way ; I have great respect for her, for she is pure and good, and I pity her immensely because she is unfortunate and unhappy. But what *I* call love—the thing that means *me*—every part of me, physical, mental, spiritual—I can't offer her. I've offered it to nobody for fifteen years."

There was a long pause. Presently Nellie Vincent said, gravely :

" Thank you, Clement. I understand. It sounds like Althea's death-knell. There is one thing more I *must* ask you. Has it ever occurred to you that Oliver North may be gone to get a divorce ? "

" Of course not," said Clement, calmly. " He couldn't possibly get one."

" Don't be too sure. Bertie tells me that in Dakota you can get a divorce for anything or nothing; and in that case——"

Clement flushed deeply.

"Yes," he said, "in that case——?"

"Althea would be free," said Nellie, very low, with averted eyes.

There was an electric silence.

Mrs. Vincent dreaded the first word; she feared that she had gone too far. Clement rose before he spoke.

"It is useless to speculate about all this," he said. "When the contingencies arise they must be faced. Until then—" He hesitated, holding out his hand.

"We're friends still, aren't we, Clement?" asked Nellie, looking up at him.

"Friends always, Nellie," he answered. "Good-bye."

## CHAPTER XI

### THE MASTERY OF A WOMAN

AFTER her encounter with Moorlake Althea broke down entirely. She went to bed early that evening, and did not get up for two weeks. There was no disease ; she simply lay there, growing thinner, weaker, more lethargic. It didn't seem worth while to get up and dress. She would have forgotten to eat if Nellie had not insisted on her taking food. Moorlake was kept informed of her condition, but there was no communication between them. He was never out of Althea's mind, waking or sleeping, yet such was her languor that she felt no desire to see him again. He had become a beautiful abstraction. The Vincents were seriously alarmed. For the first fortnight they hesi-

tated to consult a physician, but at last, when they realized that Althea was fading away, they sent for their own doctor.

Jim Burton—all his friends called him Jim —was only forty years old. He was a man of almost colossal size, with the skin of an infant and the smile of a cherub. Before he had talked five minutes to a patient the sufferer felt on the high-road to recovery, and his charming buoyancy and hopefulness made him beloved by even comparative strangers, while his friends doted on him.

Of course, it was necessary to confide in him to a certain extent. In any case, he would have known, after a glance at Mrs. North, that she was suffering from mental shock. Nellie took him in one day without warning Althea. She looked at him with eyes void of surprise, and listlessly greeted him ; they had often met in society. Burton sat down and began talking of nearly everything except illness. Althea was soon

languidly smiling. Burton described a first night at a leading theatre, where he had been the evening before.

The smile broadened, and in a quarter of an hour Althea was taking the trouble to talk a little. Nellie glowed approvingly in the background. Not a word was said about health, till, just as Burton was leaving, he casually felt Althea's pulse. It was so feeble that it shocked him, though the cherubic face never changed.

"I suspect you are not eating enough," he observed. "You're inclined to be anæmic, you know; you must eat."

Althea made a little face.

"She's awfully bad about that, Jim," said Nellie. "It takes me half an hour to make her take a cup of soup."

"She doesn't want soup; give her chops and steaks and whisky-and-soda. Take her out driving to-morrow, if it's a decent morning," and the doctor departed, leaving

a light and warmth in the spiritual atmosphere which had not been there when he came.

That afternoon Moorlake gave way to a sudden impulse—one that an American would have had long before. He was passing a flower shop, and instantly resolved to send some violets and roses to Althea. He ordered the young woman in the shop to unbind one of the great, flat, jammed-together bouquets of violets, liberating the poor little blossoms and removing the bundle of straws around which, for unknown reasons, the stems are gathered ; the result was a lovely, fragrant, loose bunch surrounded by leaves. This, with a handful of tea roses, he ordered to be sent to Campden Hill. On his card he wrote, "So grieved that you are ill;" then, after a moment's reflection, added "Clement."

To him that addition of his Christian name meant a great deal; he supposed it

would mean much to her also. It seemed a sort of acknowledgment that their intimacy had not yet snapped in two—a declaration that he meant to stand by her.

The box was carried to Althea's bed. When Nellie came in to have tea with her, she found her lying with her face covered with roses and violets.

Mrs. Vincent brushed the flowers aside and looked into her eyes. The soul had come back to them.

"Clement?" asked Nellie.

"Yes," breathed Althea, softly, and held out the little card, crushed and warm from lying in her hand.

"You've been kissing it!" said Nellie, banteringly, while tears stood in her eyes. "Oh, men, men! they hold us as you do that card—to kiss or to crush us, as the fancy takes them! What a pity it should be so!"

Althea's face beamed.

"I didn't know he cared," said Althea.

Next day she was a changed woman, and went for a drive.

Meanwhile it must not be supposed that the world was standing still. Women were gossiping over their tea-cups, as usual, and the North scandal was being pretty generally discussed. Its vagueness made it the more piquant. How do these things become known?

In the first place, Moorlake's servant had heard North run from the house and bang the door behind him. Then the coachman had seen Clement supporting Althea and almost lifting her into the carriage.

Next, the Vincents' parlor-maid had observed the bruise on Althea's forehead. The Norths' servants were but human, and they had many friends in neighboring establishments. From the servants' hall to the drawing-room is but the distance of two flights of stairs, and news sails like thistledown through the air. Before long it be-

came known that the North household was broken up and that Mrs. North had taken refuge with the Vincents.

It was an anxious time for Clarice Hilyer. It was the first serious mistake of her life—from her point of view—when she told Oliver North that his wife was in Moorlake's studio. She dared contribute nothing to the surmises of the tea-drinkers, yet her very silence was taken to mean that she could, if she would, enlighten them. Thus she became in some wise involved in the mystery.

Althea's reputation had been so perfect that nothing was said against her. Her husband's meanness and neglect had been an open secret, and she had won everybody's respect by her silent endurance of his caprices. It was scarcely known among her friends that she had seen anything of Moorlake; for that reason he hoped intensely that a scandal might be avoided.

One afternoon Mrs. Hilyer sat in her

white-paneled drawing-room, surrounded by the pretty and quaint things that her taste had brought together. One rose-shaded lamp painted the room with flattering tints. The tea had just been brought up, the bits of old silver on the tray twinkled delightfully in the firelight. Clarice poured out a cup-ful and daintily dropped a thin slice of lemon into it. At that moment Clement Moorlake was announced.

The hand she held out to him was cold with a sudden emotion.

He had never worn more markedly his "Spanish hidalgo air;" his manner was smooth and courtly, but there was a danger signal in his eyes.

"You see, I am neighborly at last," he said, as he sat down near her.

"You have owed me a call for quite a fortnight—a first call, too, that ought to be returned within a week. Cream or lemon?"

Her hand hovering over the flower-

sprinkled cups was not only cold, but unsteady.

"Milk and no sugar, thank you," said Moorlake. "I was sorry your call was cut so short. I wish you had stayed."

Clarice dared to look toward him, and met his eyes full. He looked like an executioner.

"Are you quite sure you mean that?" she purred; then, to hide the shaking hand, she took up a silver cigarette case and selected a cigarette. "Will you smoke?" she asked.

"I will watch you," said Moorlake.

"Do you disapprove? Do you think it a vice?" she asked, as she applied a wax match and the tobacco caught fire.

"It is at least a vice that injures only the person who indulges in it," said Moorlake.

"It spoils the curtains," said Clarice.

"They are easily purified," said he.

"Would that we might send our consciences twice a year to be cleansed in the same way," said she.

"Do *you* feel the need of that? I thought women did not require that process."

He was drinking his tea, and she was smoking. She was thoroughly at home in her management of a cigarette; she kept the end dry and didn't gasp, swallow the smoke or get it into her eyes till they blinked, as some women do. She had a knowing way of knocking off the ashes, too; she took refuge in the manœuver now, for she was not quite sure yet of her self-control.

"You see," she observed, "it takes a fortnight to have anything cleaned; one couldn't do for two weeks without a conscience!"

Clement smiled in spite of himself. She was exquisite, sitting in the pale brocade chair, in her scarlet crêpe tea gown.

"I have thought this last fortnight that yours had gone to the cleaner's—or somewhere else," he said.

"That," said she, readily, "pre-supposes

that I had one to send. When a thing is soiled past all cleaning it goes—not to the cleaner, but to the dust-bin. But why this magisterial air, Mr. Moorlake? What have I done?"

"What *have* you done? I wish *you* would tell me that," said Moorlake. He set down his cup and gave his undivided attention to her.

"Do you know," said she, breathing more freely now that the smoke veiled her face, "I have always thought that what art gained in you was a distinct loss to the Church! With you I always feel as if all seasons of the year were Lent."

"This is not the first time you have called me a prig, Mrs. Hilyer. I dare say you are right; but a man isn't best pleased to be thought ultra-good, strange as it may appear. I think you know that."

"Then he should do something to prove the contrary. Perhaps you have."

He smiled again at her audacity, but the smile was chill ; she saw war in it.

" Is it your experience of men that they are too good ? " he asked.

" Oh, I have known so many ! All kinds,' said Clarice. All kinds, and yet all so much alike."

" You find man a wearisome study ? "

" Not when he talks in enigmas, like you—" Then, quite abruptly : " Why do you wish I'd stayed the other day ? "

" Because in my studio you would have been—" He paused.

" Yes ? well ? would have been—— ? "

" Safe."

There was a slight pause.

She looked at him with expanded eyes.

" Have I been in danger, then ? " she asked ; adding suddenly, with a delicious smile, " Is *every one* safe in your studio, Mr. Moorlake ? "

Clement blushed crimson.

She did not wait to hear his answer.

"Where is Oliver North?" she asked, quickly, with a splendid glow of courage.

"Where you have sent him!" he retorted, sharp and short. The answer burst out independent of his volition.

"Come!" said Clarice. "Good! The buttons are off at last! Which has pricked the other deepest?"

She laughed a little and began lighting another cigarette.

"Stop smoking!" said Clement. He stood up and came nearer—stood over her, towering. "Attend to me! I want the truth."

"An old want!" she smiled; "and such a vague one! Who knows the truth?"

"You know it!" he said, in a low, tense voice. "You know what you've done to injure an innocent woman. What did you say to North?"

Her heart quivered with fright, but she

sat very still. She felt amid her fear a sort of exultation in his strength and beauty while he dominated her.

"Why do you think I said anything to North?" she asked, steadily.

"I know it," he said, shortly. "What was it?"

"I refuse to tell."

"I insist."

"I refuse."

Moorlake was terrified by the sudden fury that swept through him. He dared not remain so near her; he took a turn up and down the little room. She sank back in her chair, pallid above her scarlet draperies. Fear, pride, love, desire, all fought within her. She loved torturing him, yet her heart was torn; it was hard to deny him.

In a few moments he mastered himself and returned to her.

"I beg your pardon," he said, with deadly coldness; "I was wrong. I will go."

He turned to leave her. In one spring she flung herself against him.

"Moorlake!" she half-sobbed. "Don't go! I'll tell you! Don't go!"

She seized his hand in both her own.

"Clement!" she cried, "don't go!" She seemed incapable of any other words.

He looked down at her half in pity—the pity that a man feels for a woman when his passion does not answer hers—a pity on the border of contempt. But he was too kind to hurt any woman unnecessarily.

"Sit down," he said. "Compose yourself, and answer me one question. Don't speak now; take time."

In an agony of shame she hid her face in her hands. She was within a few inches of him, and she knew that the poles divided them.

He was the only man who had ever really mastered her; and she knew that for him

she did not exist. In a moment he would get what he wanted and she would never see him again. She drew out the minute to its fullest extent. They had sunk to the sofa, he with unspoken scorn, as far from her as its limits allowed ; she with her heart bounding, her temples beating, every feeling swallowed up in the one thought that she would lose him at the end of a minute. And the minute expired and another was born, and still she was silent, still she crouched, palpitating, with her face hidden. He was stern and pale ; he would not relent. She dared not face him, for she felt, without seeing, the look in his face. The second minute slipped by, and then he spoke.

" What did you say to Oliver North ? " he demanded, and his voice sounded like the trump of doom.

There was no help for it ; she had to speak.

" I only told him—" she whispered.

"Yes," he said, with forced patience. "Yes; you told him——?"

"She was there." Her voice died away.

"Is that all?" he asked, still inexorable.

"Yes, all."

"Thank you," said Moorlake. He rose to go. She stretched out one hand to him; the other still hid her face.

"Is that all you want?" she asked, in a muffled voice.

Moorlake drew a deep breath.

"All," he said. "No, one thing more. Will you promise me not to injure *her?* She is an innocent woman."

Then at last she uncovered her face, and her eyes blazed at him.

"No! no!" she said. "I won't promise! She must take her chances, like other women."

His face hardened again.

"Think," he said, "if there were anything in your life you would wish to hide!"

She looked at him defiantly.

"There is no such thing," she said.

"Of course not," he assented. "I said, '*if* there were.' I appealed to your imagination—that was all."

His cold words stung like hail.

He looked full at her and added, pointedly: "There *is* nothing, of course—nothing."

She grew restive under his eyes and changed color.

"Why should I go out of my way," she asked, uneasily, "to shield a woman who is not even a friend of mine?"

"Only because she is a woman—a woman who never injured you, and never would wish to injure anyone. Be magnanimous, as you can afford to be."

"You think," said Clarice, with a strange smile, "that I can't afford to be anything else?"

"You can afford to be anyt hing you choose,

but I know that you will choose to be only what is kind—and generous."

She flashed out, suddenly:

"I wonder if you would protect *me* like this, if *I* were in her power."

"Undoubtedly," said Moorlake.

"Why?" she asked, and waited with a strained face for the answer. It was very simple.

"Because," he said, "you are a woman."

Her muscles relaxed and she fell back listlessly.

"What a tragedy!" she murmured, "to be a woman!"

"Only for those who will have it so," said Moorlake. "Come," he added; "I have your promise?"

She thought she saw a gleam of humanity. After a moment's hesitation she said:

"I promise—but it is for you."

"For me or for her," he answered, "it is the same thing."

"You are one?" said Clarice, with a return of the old mockery.

"One in the desire not to suffer for a sin of which we are innocent," said Clement, gravely. "Thank you," he added, presently, and without another word left the room.

## CHAPTER XII

### SCANDAL

It is a well-known fact that a crushed and sorrowing soul takes refuge in change of scene and, what is equally trite, carries its misery with it wherever it goes.

Althea's distaste for London grew and grew to such an extent that she could remain there no longer. She was now practically dependent on the Vincents. Her long and trying interviews with Oliver's solicitor had been unproductive. The man pitied her sincerely and wished to help her; but the machinery of the law is hard to set in motion and, like the mills of the gods, grinds slow. He promised to extort money from North if he could possibly do so; he

disliked his client and respected Althea, and she knew that he would do his best.

There was no news of Violet ; and what that meant to the mother only mothers can know.

Althea had a few fine jewels given her by her husband during the soon chilled warmth of the honeymoon. These Bertie sold for her, and thus her immediate necessities were supplied.

Somehow or other some hint as to the condition of her affairs had got abroad. Mrs. Mellor, the devoted and insipid bride—a bride no longer—met her in the street and passed her without recognition, while a burning blush on the lovely Christmas-supplement face told Althea that the slight was intentional. The untempted virtuous woman cut the tempted virtuous one.

Another day, when Althea was sitting in Kensington Gardens under budding elms, Mrs. Banfrey, the actor's wife, came by.

Althea prepared herself for another rebuff. But with all its faults the stage is not narrow-minded. Mrs. Banfrey stopped and seized her hand.

"My dear!" she exclaimed, "where have you kept yourself? What are you afraid of? We all like you; why don't you go about any more?"

Althea colored painfully, but she held the hand with gratitude; she was mean-spirited enough to like pity.

"No one believes it," continued Mrs. Banfrey. She sat down and patted the hand she still held. "And if anyone did," she added, "the time for high moral indignation is over. Haven't other women had disagreeable husbands?—and haven't they liked other men better? It's quite natural; anybody who says it isn't is a sneak and a story-teller. Why don't you face the world? It'll be all right when you're married."

Althea pulled back her hand quickly.

"Married?" she repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Married to Moorlake. Of course, he will marry you?"

Mrs. Banfrey looked at her over her sable collar, with a handsome face full of frank friendliness. Althea turned cold.

"I don't understand you," she said, with painful agitation. "Mr. Moorlake is nothing to me—or I to him. I don't know what you've heard, but whatever it is, it is not true."

Mrs. Banfrey looked confused.

"Now you're angry," she said. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean any harm. Even if it *were* true, you know, I should like you just as much—and I always liked you when we used to meet at Nellie's, though I never knew you well."

"Would *you* like it," asked Althea, almost fiercely, "if people told lies against your character?"

Mrs. Banfrey reflected a moment.

"No," she admitted. "I don't suppose I should. Perhaps they do ; if they don't, it's because I'm absurdly, pitifully in love with my own husband, as a hundred other women are, worse luck !"

"I have not wronged my husband in any way," Althea burst out. "It is all the other way ; but there is no use in talking about him." Her mouth trembled weakly.

"You poor dear!" said the actor's wife. "How *can* anyone be a brute to you! I almost wish it were true—that that icy piece of perfection would come to life and carry you off."

Althea could not answer this preposterous remark. Presently she said: "Mrs. Mellor cut me dead day before yesterday. I think she was cruel."

Mrs. Banfrey made an inarticulate sound expressive of disdain.

"That china image! She nearly killed

Geoff that night at Nellie's. It really isn't fair of the Creator to make a thing so pretty and fill it only with clockwork. Why, Mrs. North, you have more soul in your little finger than she has brains in her head! The little barber's block!"

"She is happy," said Althea. "She has a husband who loves and protects her; she has never known temptation, and she can afford to trample on an unfortunate woman who has nothing."

Mrs. Banfrey looked at her curiously.

"And it isn't true," she said; "not any of it?"

Althea faced her gravely.

"What *is* true," she said, "is that I am a deserted wife, who has lost her child, and who has no lover. That is the truth; you may tell it to everyone who wants to know."

"My poor dear!" cried Mrs. Banfrey. "I believe you, every word, and I'll stand by you through everything. And as for Mrs.

Mellor, she must pay for her boxes—after this! Geoff sha'n't give her any!"

Althea hurried home and into Nellie's arms. "Take me away," she said; "I can't bear it any more."

And so, without a word to Clement, they crossed the Channel.

## CHAPTER XIII

### MRS. MOORLAKE CALLS

BRITTANY in the Spring is a very fair substitute for England. The lanes are full of immense primroses ; the fruit trees are loaded with bloom, for as yet no drought has browned the grass and withered the leaves. The keen sea breeze counteracts the unsanitary condition of the towns and disinfects the atmosphere of places where drains are a name and good water a priceless boon.

The Vincents had found an old château, standing in a great garden near a little Breton village, not many kilometers from a certain fashionable town on the coast. There was a winding path through the beech woods which led to the shores of the

Rance, that wide river which is really not a river, but a huge salt arm of the sea.

The château was a large, square, white stucco building three stories high, the third story formed by the gray slate roof. It was draped thickly with wistaria, Virginia creeper and roses white and yellow, which flowered riotously even in Spring in that sheltered spot. The salon and the dining-room were paneled in white wood. There were old portraits and ancient mirrors in tarnished frames on the walls. The furniture was stately and chipped and moth-eaten. The curtains were of white muslin, so often washed that they had become what the French call too "ripe" to bear washing again. The garden was a mass of bloom. The sun-dial was almost covered with roses. The borders of the pond were rich in ferns, the flower beds were edged with strawberries, and the paths lined with thickets of lilac, bay and box.

The life was ideally simple. The Vincents, who never wanted company when they had each other, were perfectly happy in this solitude. Bertie had his camera, his easel, his piano, his sailboat; Nellie tended the garden and learned new dishes from the cook, who wore a wonderful thin muslin Breton cap, full of inexplicable pins and streamers; took long walks in the flowering lanes, sailed on the Rance, drove sometimes to the neighboring town, where she had friends; made lace, wrote letters—and was quite contented.

With Althea it was different. Nature alone is not enough to banish sorrow. Solitude has often a corroding effect on a character already inclined to be morbid. Althea should have had company and distraction, but she was too sensitive in her present anomalous position to desire them. Moorlake was silent; he, too, was waiting.

One day, when Althea was sitting in the

blooming garden, where the keen, almost cold air contrasted with the wealth of flowers, the postman came, as usual. She had ceased to expect news from the outside world, and when the maid handed her a letter she took it with unfeigned lack of interest. It was a document in a long, legal-looking envelope, with American stamps on it, and the postmark was Sioux Falls, Dakota. She opened the cover and read the contents. It was long before she mastered them. When the meaning penetrated at last to her tortured understanding she rose and went to Nellie. Nellie, her constant refuge, was putting fresh roses into vases in the dining-room. Bertie was sitting in the corner, cleaning his palette.

"Nellie—Bertie—" said Althea, and for a moment could say no more. Her face was dreadful—suddenly sunken as if death had touched it.

Bertie sprang up, and Nellie put her arm

round her. They saw the paper in her hand, and gently drew it away.

"Look!" she said; "it is come. Look!"

Vincent examined the paper. It was a formal announcement that on a certain date Oliver North had sued for a divorce and the case had "gone by default." It had been one of those monstrous and iniquitous mockeries of law which have become customary, and which the United States Government either cannot or will not put an end to.

"What does it mean, Bertie?" asked Althea. "I don't quite understand."

Vincent's face was very stern.

"It means," said he, "that North has had his revenge. He has divorced her," he added, to his wife.

"The brute!" cried Nellie.

"And my child?" said Althea.

There was silence for a moment; no one answered.

"I'm afraid he has the child," presently said Vincent.

Again weakness overcame Althea; she sank into a chair and hid her face. Nellie felt that she could offer no comfort just then. She went on mechanically handling the roses on the table. After a few moments, during which all three were silent, Althea looked up.

"This means," said Althea, "that I am free. Disgraced—and free."

"Free, but not disgraced," said Vincent, warmly. "There is not a creature in the world who believes you guilty."

Althea smiled sadly.

"Can I keep this a secret—for a time?" she asked. "I don't want. . . ."

The Vincents had enough perception to fill in the pause. They knew that she was thinking of Moorlake.

"Will it be in the papers?" Althea went on.

"In the American ones, I suppose," said Nellie; "but people in London don't see them much."

"I will go away for a little," said Althea. "I want to think," and she left the room.

Her friends heard her slowly ascending the stairs. They looked at each other.

"Will he come?" asked Nellie, and Bertram only shook his head, like one in doubt.

A week after the arrival of the letter something occurred hardly less disquieting. One afternoon, when the Vincents were sailing on the Rance, Althea was wandering aimlessly in the garden. Exquisite nature was by degrees soothing her pain. It is hard to carry a sorrow under a blue sky amid roses. For a time, while the breeze blows and the flowers bloom and the sun shines, one must relax one's hold on trouble. It was so with Althea. Something of the sweet, impersonal charm of nature stole

over her; her mind was grown accustomed to care, and to-day she bore it more lightly; it began to chafe her less.

The Breton maid came out under the trees, her snowy cap shining white under the sun rays. She held a salver, and on it was a card.

"Mrs. Moorlake."

The utter unexpectedness of the name stopped Althea's blood for an instant.

It took but a moment to cross the grass and enter the house, but that moment was fraught with a dozen sensations. She would not give herself time to hesitate and grow timid. She went straight to the salon.

Mrs. Moorlake sat very upright in an old carved chair, one hand on its arm, the other holding a parasol. She rose as Mrs. North came in. Her gown was of black silk, made in a bygone style, but she looked like a queen—the queen of fiction, not of real life. Eyes like Clement's fixed themselves on

Althea, who forced herself to meet them. She felt that they were hostile.

Neither spoke for a few moments. The strain was manifestly disagreeable.

"I have not the honor of knowing you well," said Mrs. Moorlake at last. "You may wonder at my coming. I am at Dinard for a day or two, and I heard that you were here."

Althea looked at her with fascinated attention. Even the voice was like Clement's. An agony of longing rushed over her—longing to hear *his* voice, not the counterfeit, which brought only a sense of trouble, without consolation.

"Oh, you are at Dinard?" she said, hardly knowing what she said. "A pretty place, isn't it?"

"Pretty enough, but I don't like the natives, said the old lady, dryly. "My mind is too much occupied with a rather painful subject —I cannot enjoy the beauties of Brittany,

or of any other place, because of this preoccupation——"

"I am sorry," said Althea, with colorless civility. She was bracing herself for what was coming.

"I will not apologize for my visit," went on Mrs. Moorlake.

"I am sure you never apologize for anything," said Althea, and was shocked to hear the enmity expressed in her tone.

The note of war had been sounded. Mrs. Moorlake's nostrils expanded—fine, sensitive nostrils like those of her son.

"I do not apologize for what I do," she said, "because I do nothing that I think wrong."

"That is certainly the way to be happy," observed Althea. Her courage had returned.

"I have never seen you, except once in my son's studio—I will not recall that unlucky day—but I fancy that you are a woman who will listen to reason."

"I have nothing else to listen to—when you speak," said Mrs. North, politely.

The elder woman eyed her narrowly.

"The present generation is trifling and satirical. They would manufacture smart phrases at the brink of the grave. It was not so with us. We knew how to be serious. I shall not make a long story. My son knows nothing of this visit. He is at home, and he does not think that I am near you. I heard only two days ago that your husband had divorced you. You must pardon my touching on this painful subject."

"Never apologize," said Althea, "when you are doing right."

"I have been," proceeded the old lady, "obliged to know what has happened between you and my son—not much, perhaps, but *too* much, certainly, judged by the standards of virtuous women. Clement is extremely chivalrous, fantastic even, in his dealings with the other sex. He and I differ.

He considers man the aggressor. I, on the contrary, believe that women are responsible to the uttermost for whatever happens to them."

"Your views are extremely interesting," said Althea, who was very pale, "but I fail to see why you made this long, dusty journey for the purpose of declaring them to a stranger." She spoke without a shadow of insolence, but her words nettled the other woman.

"Because I have more than the declaration of my views to make. I think it highly probable that my son, with his overstrained sense of honor, may ask you to marry him. You must see that, for several reasons, this must not be."

"I should like to hear the reasons."

"You shall; that is only fair. First of all I do not recognize divorce—the Church does not, either. In any case, your divorce is one of those fraudulent ones obtainable

only in America. You cannot marry again, legally—at least, not in England. Is not that reason enough ?"

" If there are more reasons I should like to hear them."

The old lady looked at Althea with a certain softening of countenance. She loved courage, and admired that of her victim.

" There is nothing," she said, " so near my heart as my boy. He is all I have. He is the best man God ever made, and what he is to me I can't even try to express. He is a great sculptor ; everyone recognizes that. He is on the eve of being made an R. A. If he marries a divorced woman he will be ruined."

She paused and looked anxiously for Althea's reply. Suddenly Althea broke out into a peal of laughter—laughter scarcely sane.

Mrs. Moorlake was appalled.

" You *laugh !* " she cried, disgusted.

"I laugh!" said Althea, wiping her eyes, and smiling like a mad woman. "Why shouldn't I? I am ruined, penniless, disgraced—without husband, child or lover—and all this might be remedied if you hadn't set your heart on your son being an R. A.! Oh, it's funny! funny!" and she laughed again, while the tears trickled over her wan face.

Mrs. Moorlake saw that she was on the verge of hysterics, and was alarmed. She produced a little flask of lavender salts and offered it to Althea.

"You have been tried too far," said Mrs. Moorlake, kindly.

"Don't mind it," said Althea, more calmly. "Every one insults me, except the Vincents. I am used to it, only—only— Oh, have you no sense of proportion? Is the Royal Academy heaven? I know R. A.'s who are not angels. Would you rather have your son an R. A. than an honest man?"

Mrs. Moorlake kept her temper.

"Try to be calm," she said. "Let us put the Royal Academy out of the question, put aside my natural pride in my boy, and think of the other reasons. In order to marry you Clement would be obliged to expatriate himself. You and he could not live in England."

Althea's sobs and smiles ceased. She was once more pale and composed.

"My dear lady," she said, "your reasons are good, but I have one that is better. You take it for granted that I want to marry your son. Nothing on earth would induce me to do so. Your son does not love me."

Mrs. Moorlake sank back in her chair. Surprise was pictured in her face.

"You know that?" she cried, and her black lace draperies trembled with her movement. "I never would have said it to you; I am not cruel enough."

"There was very little that you did not

say," said Althea. "You need not have spared me that. I have never had the slightest wish to marry your son. I repeat, nothing on earth could persuade me to do so."

The mother drew a long sigh of relief.

"My dear Mrs. North," she said, "you make me very happy."

"Thank you," said Althea; "that is for me a great privilege."

"You feel bitter toward me, I'm afraid; but I assure you that personally I have nothing whatever against you."

"You are very kind; but while we are in the Palace of Truth let me tell you that I very much resent what you have done. The question was one that only Mr. Moorlake and I could decide. You came here without warning, with a face like a hanging judge, to dictate to me. If I had wished to marry your son, do you think I should have hidden myself here and concealed my address?"

"Clement knows your address."

"He is as indifferent to me as—I am to him." Althea stumbled in these words. She was by nature a truth-teller. "We have been," she went on, "involved in a net of terrible circumstances. We must try to forget—to live them down—that is all."

"I am sorry for you, Mrs. North, and I respect you," said Mrs. Moorlake. She rose somewhat stiffly from her chair.

"Never apologize," said Althea, smiling.

"You turn my words against me," said the old lady. "May I ask you one favor? Do not tell Clement that you have seen me."

"I have no communication with Mr. Moorlake. I trust you not to mention my name to him."

Mrs. Moorlake extended her hand.

Althea ignored it and walked toward the door.

"You have a carriage, of course?" she

asked. She touched a bell, and the Bretonne appeared.

"Good-bye," said Mrs. Moorlake. There was a red flush on her cheeks.

Althea stood on the doorsteps and watched the carriage drive away.

When Bertie and Nellie returned they found her quite composed. She told Nellie of Mrs. Moorlake's visit.

"It has done me good," she said. "She made me feel raving at first, but afterward I realized . . ." Her voice died away and she looked out of the great window by which they were sitting.

"Realized what?" asked Nellie, softly.

"How impossible it all is. I think I had had a sort of unacknowledged hope, or rather wish, before. That old lady put it all so clearly to me, Nellie. I saw it all—Clement the cold, respectable candidate for the Royal Academy, and poor me, nobody in particular, weighed down by an ugly scandal,

living on charity. You see it wouldn't do—even if he loved me . . . I mean to be very different after this. I intend to be done with sighing and crying and making demands on your sympathies. I am not old and I am not wicked. My sin is that I have suffered and suffered till I couldn't bear the pain any more, and now I am punished for having been patient so long. You know, when people in the old days were crucified and took too much time dying, they had their bones broken. Well, I feel like that ; all my tortures haven't killed me, but my bones are broken. Mrs. Moorlake smashed a few to-day—her son broke some before I left England. But I'm going to knit them together somehow, and stand up and face people. Oliver North is the sinner, not I. People will find that out some day."

Althea's words were feverish, but not her manner. Nellie gazed at her in surprise.

"I think," she said, with some heat, " that

that old woman deserves to be shut up. It was intolerable of her to come."

"She came because she loved Clement; and I resented it because I loved Clement. That fact can't be mended. I must face it." She was silent for a few moments, staring out into the dusky garden. Then she went on: "Nellie, do you believe in God?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Vincent, startled. "Don't you?"

"Yes, I do; but I can't understand anything. I have prayed and prayed and prayed, asking to be set free."

"And you have been."

"Yes, but in what a way! I can't help thinking all the time that there must be one man on earth who would have loved me. He might be poor, and not handsome; but if he had only just loved me . . . It is awful to have all that taken out of one's life so young! For I am young for my age—like a child who feels that she has a right to be

happy, and yet can't be. I have tried so hard to find out why Oliver was so cruel and so indifferent, why he always left me, why he seemed to feel no responsibility toward me; and I don't know why. It's all a puzzle."

After a pause Nellie said: "There is one thing for which I think you should be prepared. I believe that Clement is coming here."

Althea turned a shade paler in the dusk. "Why? Why do you say that?"

"I don't know, but I feel sure of it. Bertie thinks so, too."

"Don't let him come! Oh, don't let him!"

"Suppose he were to ask you to marry him—to insist on it?"

"I should refuse."

"It is easy to say so now—here; but suppose he were in this room, beside you—near, near—with his hand in yours. Could you refuse?"

Althea sprang up with a little cry. "You are cruel!" she exclaimed. "I will not see him."

She walked restlessly to the other window. The maid came in with the lamps, and the mellow glow showed Althea with white face and wide, scared eyes. When they were alone again she came to Nellie.

"If you let him come I'll never forgive you!" she said. "It would be too degrading! He will ask me from a sense of honor to marry him—and I shall refuse. And he will go away again, and everything will be worse than ever. Don't let him come!"

Nellie sighed.

"I know I'm killing you," continued Althea, "but there will be a change. I *will* be different, I swear it. I shall begin tomorrow."

Bertie came in, dressed for dinner. Althea went up to him and laid her hand on his arm.

"I'm going to stop teasing you, Bertie," she said. "I'm going to be a nursery governess or something. I want you to tell me how to begin. I want to earn my living."

"All right," said Vincent, with his usual careless, pleasant manner. "Begin by governessing me. There are lots of things I need done for me. Nellie neglects me shamefully." The look he cast on his wife made Althea's eyes fill.

"I'll do anything you like—and I want to go sailing and I want to see Dinard. I've been getting into bad ways lately—I'm lazy and out of sorts, but I mean now to be energetic."

"Quite right," said Bertie. "Come along and energetically eat. '*Madame est servie*,' and I saw a thundering big lobster in the *garde-manger* this afternoon."

He held out his arm to Althea and took her in to dinner. She was gay and talkative, as they had not seen her for a year;

but Bertie noticed, the observation of the artist quickened by affection, how fragile and pinched her face looked above the soft lace of her tea gown.

As they rose from the table the postman arrived and the letters were brought in. There was one for Althea.

It contained merely these words :

The day after you receive this I shall be with you. I do not ask permission for fear you may withhold it ; but you must be kind and let me see you.

CLEMENT MOORLAKE.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE LOVER'S COMING

WHAT Althea most craved and most dreaded had come to pass. She finished the evening creditably, having betrayed nothing. Bertie also had received a letter from Moorlake by the same post, and was concealing the fact from Althea. He felt nervous and uncomfortable, finding himself in the midst of an affair that promised to be eminently unsatisfactory to everyone concerned in it.

Althea thought that Nellie kissed her that night with a deeper, more yearning tenderness than usual—happy Nellie, whose marriage was one of the few perfect ones. Each knew the thoughts of the other, but had learned during the past months to econo-

mize their emotions and save themselves as much nervous wear and tear as possible.

When Althea was alone she gave herself no time for thought. Every time that she began thinking of Moorlake she instantly thought of something else ; the more trivial the subject the better it answered the purpose. As she lay in the old paneled room, in the dark, she tried to summon up landscapes she had seen, tunes she had heard; she even recited poems in her mind. There was one stanza of "Come into the garden, Maud," which she could never get right the first time, and by constant mental repetition she managed not to hear—or to pretend not to hear—the voice of her subjective mind, which constantly whispered : " Clement is coming to-morrow—what will you say to Clement ?" Hers was a brain that worked very much like a squirrel in a cage—or rather the brain was the cage and the squirrel was the dominating idea that never was still.

It toiled with agonizing effort round and round, round and round, and never got any further. To lie in the dark all alone with that in one's head is worse than a nightmare ; the process is practically endless, and has nothing of the sharp crisis of a bad dream, from which one must wake.

Althea clutched her pillow and strained every fibre in her quest of diversion. Scene after scene rose before her mind with the distinctness given by overwrought nerves Often the face of Violet came, and it was so terrible to her that she hastened to think of something—anything—else. She found herself trying to count her clothes and calculate what a Summer wardrobe would cost ; then suddenly she would repeat the names of the Cæsars, making a mistake and going back to rectify it. The strain was growing intolerable, when mercifully the tired mind gave way and she fell asleep.

The first hint of morning roused her.

She came to herself in a moment with the curious instantaneous impression that there was someone in the room. But it was empty of all bodily presence but hers. She rose in the nipping chill of the early morning, threw open the blinds and looked out. It was the solemn, the terrible hour of dawn —dawn, when sins and sorrows loom large and near, and heaven and hope seem very far away. The garden was dim and chaotic, with clumps of deeper darkness blotting a sombre background. The trees were still and terrible, just discernible against a sky only less black than they.

Who that is without God and hope can bear to watch the dawn? It is the hour when the heart cries out, shuddering for some voice, some promise, to tell us that life with its struggles is not all in vain.

The neutral tints became pale, the sky cleared and trembled with a faint luminousness, the shrubs and bushes turned green.

Presently the garden gave a hint of color, of heaps of pink and red and yellow roses, of masses of young lilac and golden laburnum. The birds twittered and chirped and whistled ; the air was resonant with melodic flutings. The sky grew blue, the sunbeams shot up, and the flowers were no longer delicate-hued ghosts ; the world was a mass of color, a riot of music, and day had come.

The silent watcher crept back to her pillow, and this time to unbroken sleep.

The inhabitants of the chateau drank their morning coffee in retirement, a breakfast table being a thing abhorrent to all three. Althea slipped out of the house unobserved and spent the morning in the beech woods on the edge of the Rance. She began to understand the feelings of a man condemned to be executed ; every moment of delay must, she thought, make death seem harder. A few minutes before midday she strolled back to the house.

Standing by the rose-embraced sun-dial were the Vincents and Clement Moorlake. Much to her own surprise, Althea felt no immediate sensation at sight of him. They shook hands very quietly, she without looking at him. The human heart can hold only a certain amount of joy or suffering in the twenty-four hours, and Althea's power of feeling was, for the time being, exhausted.

"This is an unceremonious hour for calling," said Moorlake, "but I was impatient to see you all."

"Clement came *via* Paris," explained Nellie, who looked far more unhappy than Althea. "The train arrives very early, you know."

"This is a difficult place to get to," said Clement. "All roads are equally disagreeable."

He was looking at Althea; she felt the glance, though she was trying to pretend, like a child, that he was somebody else.

She dared not let the full sense of his presence sink into her consciousness. Yet she seemed to know without seeing that he was worn and tired, that there was an accentuation of that aspect of delicacy which accorded so ill with his great muscular strength.

Nellie noticed how colorless his clear, fine skin had grown and how much grayer was his hair at the temples. He, too, she thought, had no doubt had his battles to fight!

"My mother is at Dinard," said Moorlake. "I saw her a few minutes this morning—met her accidentally, in fact. I did not know she was there; I thought she was at Dinan."

"They are very close together, you know," said Althea. She forced her eyes to meet Clement's, and saw a question in them. He was mentally asking, "Have you seen her?"

"Come to breakfast," said Bertie, who had been loitering about examining the

roses. "Looks like June, doesn't it?" he added, turning to Clement.

"A lovely climate, apparently," said Moorlake. "I always wonder when I am on the Continent why we live in England."

"And I," said Nellie, as she led the way to the breakfast-room, "always wonder why we ever leave it. Even the costermongers seem nice to me after the Latin races."

"Don't be rude, Nellie," said Moorlake. "Remember that my grandmamma was an Italian."

"That's the only thing about you that's not nice; it suggests stilettos and vendettas."

"To an American it suggests peanuts and cheap ice cream, grind-organs and monkeys," said Althea, and she went on in this vein as if she were entertaining a man she had never met before.

Clement, after his racking night in the train, was downright hungry, and unaffectedly enjoyed his breakfast, eaten from

Quimper plates with big fleurs-de-lis on them in two shades of blue. Althea thought bitterly how strange it was that men could nearly always eat. She herself pretended, and talked fast enough to cover the pretense.

It had been part of her plan of self-immolation to take no extraordinary trouble in dressing herself that day. She had on a well-worn dark-blue coat and skirt and a simple mauve silk blouse. Air and excitement had given her a color of unusual brilliancy ; sorrow had a little sharpened features already delicate ; nothing could spoil the lovely mass of warm-tinted hair that owed all its beauty to nature. Bertie and Nellie looked at her anxiously, and thought she had never appeared more charming. To them she was lovely and lovable ; why could not their friend see her with their eyes ? After breakfast they all sat in the garden, with their coffee and cigarettes, in a spot made genially warm by the sunshine.

First Bertie made some flimsy excuse and drifted away; Nellie talked on bravely, but in a few minutes Bertie called to her, "Come, look at this rosebush! It's really extraordinary," and she followed him.

Clement smiled; even at that moment, which he felt to be one of the most important in his existence, the transparent pretext amused him. Althea did not look at him. She was wrapping about her more closely a light scarf she wore as protection against the Spring wind. There was only a minute of silence. Then Moorlake said, bluntly:

"Have you seen my mother?"

The suddenness of the question startled Althea; and he saw that she was embarrassed.

"Are you under oath not to divulge her visit?" asked Clement, "for I feel sure that she has been here."

"I have taken no oaths," said Althea.

"I never will. I think they are unwise and dangerous."

"No vows, either?" he asked, with a curious light in his eyes which she had never seen there, which made her realize that Moorlake, without his rigid sense of duty, might be a very dangerous man who would enjoy being dangerous.

"Nor vows, either," she said, firmly.

"Perhaps I shall induce you to break your vow not to make vows," he said, with a deep, liquid note in his usually cold voice.

At that moment he felt very human; the past seemed less alive than usual, and the future more vaguely desirable.

Althea felt the change in his mood, and steeled herself against it.

"I don't think your mother made me promise anything," she said.

"Then she was here?"

"Yes; since I am truthful, I must say she was."

"With what object?"

Clement had thrown away his cigarette and was bending toward her. Intense interest shone in his eyes.

Althea hesitated a moment, then said, bravely:

"In the interests of her son."

"In what her son would call his interests?"

"I think so—in the long run."

"But not just now?"

"Yes, perhaps just now, too."

"I don't believe it," said Clement, decidedly. "But why must we talk in enigmas? Are we strangers?"

"Yes," said Althea. "I think we are." Then, after a perceptible pause, "I think we always shall be."

"Why don't you trust me?" he asked, impetuously. "Why won't you help me? You know why I have come."

"You came to see us—the Vincents and

me—because you needed a change. Let it rest there."

He looked at her with astonishment.

"Do you think that I came all this distance to hear you give such an order as that?—or to obey it?"

Althea shivered a little.

"It is too cold here. Shall we go into the house?" she asked, rising.

"Certainly," he said, also rising, "if we can be alone."

They walked toward the château in silence. He felt curiously piqued and eager for one intimate word or look. It seemed as if their positions had suddenly been reversed. He knew Althea so little that he believed for a moment her manner of dealing with him was dictated by coquetry; but one look at her pale face and compressed mouth undeceived him.

They reached the salon unremarked. Moorlake shut the door and stood waiting

for her to sit down. When both were seated, he said: "It is not kind of you to keep me at arm's length."

To this she had nothing to answer.

"Surely," he said, "we have much to say to each other. You may feel a natural resentment because I have involved you in so much unhappiness, but in spite of that you must know that I am your best friend —that at least I want to be——"

"Please," she interrupted, "don't speak of the past! It is more than I can bear."

"Then let me speak of the future—that in which I beg to have a share. Tell me what my mother said to you. She has somehow turned you against me."

"Your mother loves you more than anyone does—at least in a more unselfish way—" she hesitated and colored, then went on: "You know what you are to her, how she builds on your future—your career. You still have a long life before you——"

"I am forty years old," said Clement. "If I have done nothing so far, I shall never do or be anything."

"But you have done something. You are a great sculptor ; everyone says so."

"You mean my mother says so." He made the amendment smiling.

"You are going to be an R. A.," she said, also smiling, but with some bitterness. "If you do nothing wrong or bohemian or uncanonical you are going to be one of the Forty."

A sudden illumination came into his face.

"*That* is what my mother said to you!" he exclaimed. "I understand." He looked both amused and vexed. Loyalty and annoyance struggled within him.

"You must forgive her, Althea." She winced at the sweetness of hearing him pronounce her name. "Remember that she is the one person to whom I am a heaven-born genius. She has lived only for

me all these years, while I have been making statues until I've almost become a statue myself. A hard medium of expression—and you hate sculpture ; you told me so when we first met."

Althea breathed freely. He was unbending, he was becoming a human being with whom she might talk humanly, who could in time, perhaps, open his soul to her—that part of it at least which did not contain the mysterious Other Woman.

"Do you know," she said, impulsively, leaning forward, "now, for the first time in ever so long, I feel that we are friends! I am so glad, because I had come to feel a sort of terror of you, as of something strange and unreal and icy! The thought of you was dreadful to me."

"My poor child!" he said. "I have been but a bad friend to you. But I will atone—if you will let me."

They were not far apart. He stretched

out his hand—warm, appealing, consolatory —and gently took her cold one.

She made a quick movement.

"Oh, please don't touch me!" she cried, with a sharp accent of pain.

In a moment he understood her—how she was bracing herself to withstand him, steeling her heart against him, fighting down her love for him, smothering and crushing the passionate craving for his affection which had well-nigh killed her during all the time of her great trouble. And once again, as so often before, he longed to give her his whole heart and life and soul without reservation.

"Have I been presumptuous?" he said, softly, still lightly holding her hand. "Won't you give me the right to care for you? You are free now, Althea."

"No, Clement, I shall never be free," she said, with passionate sadness. "I am a dishonored woman; all the venal laws in America cannot make me free. Nothing

can right me now—not even if there were a man who loved me."

"'If,' Althea? There is no 'if.' There *is* a man who loves you, who will try to make up to you for what you have lost."

"Ah, Clement, don't tempt me! A woman who loves as I do is easily tempted! But she is not easily satisfied. Even if I were really free, I would never, never—" She paused in distress before the word.

"Never marry me, Althea? Why?" he asked.

"There are so many good reasons—so many, and you know them all," she said.

"You are thinking about the legality of it, aren't you? We could go away—we need not live in England, where people are old-fashioned and narrow-minded. Is a woman, an innocent, unhappy woman, to go solitary all her days because a brute has deserted her? That reason is soon disposed of."

"There is another reason, Clement," she

said, in a low tone. "I need not remind you of it."

He stiffened suddenly. "You mean," he said, "the other—because——"

"Because you do not love me."

She spoke very firmly and with immeasurable sadness.

He paused and looked at her squarely. "Althea, it is five years since I saw the person of whom you are thinking. She has been married for some time."

"But you love her, Clement, and only her. You have never deceived me. How could I care for you as I do if you had? You would not be the man I love if you could lie to me."

He was confounded and knew not what to answer.

"Do you think," she said, with suppressed passion, "that I could be your wife and know that your heart and soul belong to that other woman? Could I take your kind pity for me—your liking, even your affec-

tion—when what you and I know to be *love* is wanting? I *could* not share you with another woman, Clement! Better that you should be unattainable as the stars! I could still think of you—still love you as the worthiest man I have ever known—but marry you, no! Ah, no, it would be terrible! I believe you know—I know now—that there is no middle course, no happiness in being second best."

Clement was still silent. This last revelation of Althea's character showed him what she was—what sort of woman he might have loved if the phantom of the past had not been between them.

"This must be the end—really the end," she went on. "We must not meet any more. I do not say that I shall try to forget you, for the memory of you will be my dearest possession; but I shall try to avoid ever seeing you again. I don't think I even want your picture—I could not bear it. I

have hurt you, troubled you dreadfully in dragging you into my pitiful life, where you should never have come ; but you forgive me—I know you do."

Her wide, pleading eyes gazed straight into his. He sat in a tense, strained attitude, with the look she had learned to know so well—his brows bent, his dark eyes—like those of no other man—shining with strange lights.

"Never speak of forgiveness, Althea," he said. "My one wish is to atone—to make reparation—to bring you some happiness, if you will only let me. Althea, I swear that I love you ! You are the only woman I would marry. Will you not risk it ? Who could help loving you ? I never knew you till to-day, and I know that no man could be indifferent to you."

A sudden wave of hope passed over her ; her body tingled with the glow of leaping blood.

"Clement!" she said, "if you can tell me on your honor that I am dearer to you than the other woman . . ."

His face changed. He stood up and walked to the window. She sat with her hands clenched, waiting. The birds sang in the garden. All life—its pain, its joy, its hope, its disappointment—was in that minute while the birds sang. To the man at the window death would have been less bitter. When he turned Althea knew that the hope and the joy were over, that only the pain and the disappointment were left.

"I know the answer," she said, very gently. "Don't grieve over it, Clement; it is better so."

Moorlake was a strong man; he had never cried in his life, but his heart wept then.

## CHAPTER XV

### DISILLUSION

MOORLAKE returned to London, but one sunny morning in early August found him on the beach at Dinard. He could hardly have explained why he was there. He was subject once in every few years to fits of atrophied will—periods of involition during which half of his nature hurried him into actions deeply condemned by the other half. And at one of these times he came to Dinard.

He had heard nothing from the Vincents or from Althea. Life seemed perfectly tasteless and uninteresting. He felt the lassitude left by a long, hot London season, in which his part had been played even more perfunctorily than usual. But much of his sadness, which was chronic and constitutional,

was temporarily banished by the scene about him.

It was the hour when the smart world of Dinard is wont to plunge into the gentle waves and wash away some of the weariness caused by all-night baccarat, prefaced by dancing. Many bathed, but more looked on. The sands, clean and glittering, were covered with chairs, the chairs with lovely ladies, and the lovely ladies with fresh, light gowns. There were very few painted faces and dyed heads ; even the most charming had that seal of respectability which in the eyes of the well-conducted adds a charm to beauty. There was the usual sprinkling of rackety August visitors who change Dinard from a staid residential town, conquered by Anglo-Saxons, into a vortex of baccarat, cocktails, flirtations, picnics and balls. Then it is that men have been known to drink yellow chartreuse out of wine glasses at the club in the morning, and mothers of families

sit with greedy eyes fixed on the "little horses" as they run along, winning—for the bank. Then it is that there is time for nothing but enjoyment—when one sits of an afternoon opposite the Casino, at the pastry cook's—where the cakes are guaranteed to add a stone to one's weight in six weeks—when one curses, if one is an Anglo-Saxon, between sips of Ceylon tea, the truly Gallic cruelty of the stupid Breton *cochers* who congregate in that quarter—a vile blot on the loveliness of the place.

There is an amusement for every hour and for every minute a fresh subject of gossip — dear, delightful, diverting gossip—which leaves "not even Lancelot brave, nor Galahad clean."

Moorlake's sober face was out of place on the *plage*, and many a woman thought how pleasant it would be to call a smile to it. The morning was made for happiness; it was neither cold nor hot; the air was light

and exhilarating, with a tang of salt in its softness.

Clement saw a chair standing somewhat apart from the others, and appropriated it. There were a good many people in the water, but none wore the extraordinary costumes in vogue at other French watering-places. Few dresses were coquettish, or even becoming. Presently a tall figure waded ashore. It was a woman who had been swimming. She was dressed in pale blue, and her head was covered by a blue silk handkerchief with great ends standing up on top. She was accompanied by several men, and passed quite close to Moorlake on the way to her cabin. For an instant he saw her in profile, and was conscious of a sudden shock. He turned and watched her retreating figure—a very good one, even in its undisguised state. He saw her enter the cabin, after a few chaffing words with her escort at the door; noted the number, and sat for

three-quarters of an hour facing it, waiting for her to come out.

At last, after several excursions of her maid, fetching and carrying between the cabin and some unknown point, the lady opened the door, put out a well-shod foot, and stepped forth on the beach. No wonder it had taken forty-five minutes to make her what she was. She was dressed in the fashion of the day-after-to-morrow—for which she did not mean to pay till the day after that. To look at her was to realize the actual existence of all those mysterious French words found even in the least French of fashion papers—*tabliers*, *appliqué*, *revers*—to say nothing of incrustations, pipings, accordeon pleatings and other things to be found in England. The gown was a marvelous collection of materials, so cunningly constructed that a man who was not in the business would have called it "simple," thus proving himself the same. The figure inside

the gown was all that comparative youth, conscientious exercise and four-guinea stays could make it. The lady's hat was a wide-brimmed "confection" of big pink roses, with yards of tulle that did wonderful things all round them, and finally wound itself about the wearer's throat. The face under the hat was charmingly tinted—by what did not yet appear—and had straight features and hard blue eyes. The hair was the color of gilt, with even waves that looked as if they were cut out of brass, from the nape of the long neck to the place where they met the back of the hat.

Moorlake sat on his chair and looked at the lady. He could not have catalogued her like the cold narrator. He only knew that she was the woman he had loved for fifteen years.

She came over the sands directly toward him. He rose.

"I can't be mistaken," she began, in a

hard, clear voice ; " you are surely Clement Moorlake ? "

" Yes," he admitted, " I am."

" You don't know me ? It is so long since we met. To think of your being here ! It's delightful. Do you know me ?"

She smiled as she asked the question.

Moorlake paused before answering. He was visibly disturbed.

" You must be—I am sure you are—Lady Bembridge."

" I am Hyacinth to you, Clement, or ' Cinthy,' it used to be, didn't it ? "

She laughed lightly.

Moorlake winced. " That was a long time ago," he said, stiffly.

" But how well you wear ! No dye, no make-up ! That gray above the temples is the finishing touch to your fascination. Don't you remember, I always told you that you would grow handsomer with age ? I was a true prophet."

Lady Bembridge regarded him with undisguised interest. Clement looked squarely into her hard eyes.

"Is Lord Bembridge here?" he asked.

"Oh, how like you!" cried Hyacinth. "First of all the proprieties! You have changed as little as your face. No, Bembridge is not here. We are like the little couple who foretell the weather—never seen together," and she laughed again. "We do not pose any more. Now ask me if I have any children."

"Have you?" and Clement managed to smile a little.

"None; it's a disappointment to my husband, as he hates the next heir, but I don't approve of them. Children spoil a woman's career."

"That depends on what sort of career it is."

"Mine is a sort of 'Rake's Progress.' Don't look shocked—only ugly men should

ever look shocked, for then nobody would mind them. It's quite true, Clement. I have every vice except stinginess. How are you getting on? Still doing those great, lumpy statues? Have you made a fortune? If you have you must lend me something, for I ruined myself last night at the Casino."

"My letter of credit is at your disposal," said Moorlake, gravely.

"How solemn you are! It is really too nice to see you again! Where are you stopping?"

Moorlake named his hotel.

"I am breakfasting at the Terrasses, and doing things all day; but you must come to the Casino to-night, won't you?"

"I neither dance nor gamble."

"No, but you can talk—and listen. Do come! I want to see you so much!"

"Is it really *pleasant* to you to see me?"

"Of course! Why not? One outlives everything—except one's appetite. I *am* so

hungry! Oh, there's Dolkovski at last. You're late, Prince. The Marchants eat at half-past twelve."

One of the escort had approached, a big Russian with a Romanoff look about him.

"They will not eat at that time to-day," he observed, with a heavy smile.

Then he looked at Clement disapprovingly.

"This is an old friend, Mr. Moorlake. But he doesn't like Russian princes. He reads Ouida, and knows they are all desperate characters. Come along, Dolly. To-night, Clement, about nine-thirty," and she walked away with her prince.

The day passed to Moorlake like a confused dream. He tried to join the new revelation to the old conception. A disease of fifteen years' standing is not to be cured by one dose of medicine, no matter how strong the drug may be. He shrank from a repetition of the dose, but he knew that he

must swallow it. And so, after hours of walking, with unseeing eyes fixed on the fine landscape, he returned to dress, dine and meet Hyacinth Bembridge at the Casino.

It was easy to distinguish her among the other women ; her superior stature and the pronounced style of her gown attracted everyone's attention. She glittered from throat to feet with steel sequins, and round her neck, looped up to her breast with diamonds and falling loose again, was a rope of great pearls. There was a group of men about her, but no women. One man was a French count—the sort of thing France makes badly since the Republic—a weak, stooping, livid young creature with a preposterous nose, no chin to speak of, and a red orchid in his coat. Another was a clean-limbed, well-washed Englishman, who could not go back to England owing to pecuniary misunderstandings. A third was an elderly man with a magenta face and a bottle-nose—

one of the props of the chartreuse industry —and the fourth was the Russian prince.

Moorlake hesitated a moment, then walked up to the group and bowed to Lady Bembridge.

"Oh, you did come! So glad. Come outside; it's stuffy here. Go and dance, Dolly! Madame de Ternon is looking for you."

The Russian glowered, and the little count sighed as he surveyed Moorlake's inches.

"*Ces anglais, ces anglais!*" he murmured

"You should make them get out," said Dolkovski, sulkily. "They think they own the place.'

"*Mon cher, I* am English!" observed the magenta man, reprovingly.

"*Pardon!* I forgot. You don't look it," retorted the prince, with double spite.

"And I," said the other Englishman.

"Ah, but one doesn't think of you *as* an Englishman; you can't stand the climate!"

Hyacinth drew Moorlake toward the un-

lighted end of the veranda. The moon was full and the tide so high that a short time before it had dashed against the stones at the base of the Casino.

"This is the flirtation corner," said Hyacinth, "but as you don't know how to flirt, it's wasted on you. I'm glad there's a moon, for people will see you, and I shall like them to. I'm awfully tired of the men, particularly Dolkovski. He's not amusing."

She leaned back in her chair, glittering like a moonbeam, fingering her pearls.

"Aren't these nice!" she went on. "I have wanted them for years. One would do anything for a rope of pearls! Solomon, who knew so much, said that the price of a virtuous woman was *above* rubies; you see, he meant pearls!"

"A new interpretation of Scripture," said Moorlake, dryly. He was mentally trying to peel away this present picture of her, as one might scrape a palimpsest to get a

glimpse at the old meaning beneath the accretions of time.

"How do you like Dinard?" Hyacinth rattled on. "They say Zola is coming to write up the smells. I felt inspired to-night as I came along the street to make a poem called 'Moonlight on the Drain.' Wouldn't it be a choice subject? You see, the French hate us, and try to kill us with drains—or want of them. But we come, all the same, and bring Condy's Fluid. Isn't it pretty here?"

Clement thought her ill at ease, in spite of her hard eyes.

"Which question must I answer first?"

"Don't be so serious. Tell me about yourself."

"I am more serious than ever when I talk about myself, and I dislike doing it."

"How little changed you are!"

For the first time her voice was free from mockery, and she sighed.

"I am more changed than I thought or knew," he said.

"How solemn your eyes are, Clement! I believe it was those eyes that frightened me away. . . . . Sometimes I think I should like to pretend that we are young again, and that we love each other."

"That *I* love you," he corrected. "You never cared for me."

"Yes, I did—in a way. I loved your beauty and your strength. Do you remember when you stopped my horse that was running away, and saved my life—for this?"

She shivered a little and drew her violet chiffon wrap about her. The gesture recalled that of Althea months before in the garden, and the thought of Althea struck warm on his heart.

"Why did you promise to marry me, Hyacinth, and then try to break my heart?" he asked.

"Why? Who knows? Why do I do anything? My life is a series of question marks, and I haven't been able to find the answers. But I think you were too good—not only better than I deserved, but too good to please me long."

"The old story—I was a prig! I suppose men all the world over who try to behave like gentlemen are called prigs."

"There are so few, Clement! Since I broke with you I have hardly known a man whom you would call a gentleman."

"Not one in fifteen years? Poor thing!"

"What is your definition of a gentleman, Clement? Opinions vary so."

Moorlake was silent for a moment.

"A man," he said, presently, "who tells the truth and never takes advantage of a woman."

"And yet, Clement, do you remember our one meeting in fifteen years—in Rome? You tried to make love to me then." She

leaned forward, with the broad moonlight softening her eyes.

Moorlake flushed deeply.

"Hyacinth," he said, "I've been five years doing penance. I swore then that there should be no women in my life."

"And you have kept your vow?"

He was silent.

"You are sure you made no one unhappy? . . . No answer? Never mind; don't tell me. You aim too high. You see, *I* am contented with very small triumphs in the realm of aspiration."

"Don't be so bitter about yourself," he said. "It hurts me to hear it. Why do you lead this life of which you complain?"

"Because I love excitement, because I must have money."

He glanced instinctively at the pearls she was fingering.

"Ah, those," she said, "were a present. I have nothing to live for except amuse-

ment, and I don't believe in a future life—so why pretend? I am hopelessly estranged from Bembridge. We seldom meet. Life without movement, amusement, pretty gowns and pleasant places and nice things to eat would be worse than death to me."

"And the other things for which women care—honest love, a good name, respect and consideration in society?"

"Are deadly dull and awfully overrated. I am going away from this place. There are lots of the virtuous, hardworking, painstaking matrons whom you admire, here, and they look askance at me. Not all, for I'm still a countess! but there are enough shocked faces to annoy me. I shall go to some place where the people are all French. After all, they are the only ones who can cook and who know how to wear their clothes, and I shall be happy."

Moorlake was pale with disgust.

"Happy?" he repeated.

"Well, gay! That's the nearest approach to happiness."

There was a long silence. The sound of the waltz drifted out, and stray couples came up to the corner, then, seeing Hyacinth and Moorlake, moved away.

"What are you thinking, Clement?" she asked at last.

"I am thinking that I am glad I did not kill myself fifteen years ago," he said, quietly.

"Take me back, please; I want to dance," she said rising.

Once in the room she turned a hard face to him.

"Are you going?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "Good-night—and good-bye."

He was glad to be alone. Fifteen years had been suddenly sponged off the slate of life. He was free—free to love the woman who loved him—free to tell her so.

Early morning found him at the château.

Before Nellie Vincent had fairly entered the room where he waited he said :

" Althea ! where is she ? "

" Clement, you have come too late," she replied.

" Too late ! What do you mean ? She's not dead ? "

" Not dead ; but yesterday she left us, and we don't know where she has gone."

## CHAPTER XVI

### IN RETREAT

It had not been easy for Althea to leave Dinard without the knowledge of the Vincents.

For weeks her longing to go had been growing. Her position began to appear intolerable; with the undue sensibility of overstrained nerves, she felt that she was becoming a burden to Bertie and Nellie, and she determined to be so no longer. She was possessed, moreover, by the haunting fear that Clement would not accept her refusal as final, and the thought of having to undergo a second ordeal spurred on her resolution to disappear.

One day, when the Vincents had gone to Dinan, she induced the gardener at the

château to harness a cart and drive her and her boxes over to Dinard. The boat, which left at dusk, was not crowded, and she easily secured a berth.

When Nellie returned she found only these few lines awaiting her :

Forgive me, dear—both of you—my kind, good friends. I am going away for a time. Do not try to find me. Some day I will write to you, or come. I have worn out your patience, and you must have rest. How I thank you I need not say.

ALTHEA.

Nellie's grief and alarm were little short of frantic ; and meanwhile Althea lay in the cabin of the little steamer, on the way to England.

It was a long night ; she was stark awake —her eyes would not stay shut. Her mind was almost a blank. She had come to that stage where there seems neither hope nor fear ; where thought and reasoning faculty are alike overpowered by a curious lethargy.

Without such seasons of mental supineness the nervous and overstrained must perforce become the insane.

In the early part of the night, before the few passengers settled down to rest, two ladies near Althea were talking in low tones. Althea listened mechanically.

"It is a very pretty place," said one, "and quite cheap; four miles from Arundel—a jolly old farmhouse with a thatched roof and ivy; quite a place to lose one's self in."

The last phrase interested Althea acutely.

"I often think," said the other woman, "how easy it would be to hide in such a place. That part of the world is very primitive, though it's only about two hours from town."

Althea listened still more intently.

"What's the address? I might take the children there for Easter."

"Kennerton Farm, Bury, Sussex. You go from Victoria."

Then the conversation languished, and the ladies slept.

To Althea what she had heard seemed providential—if anything could seem providential ever again. It was the voice of fate, perhaps, at last giving her a hint as to what she should do—not leaving her to flounder helplessly in the bog of circumstance. So at least she chose to consider it.

Morning found her in England—dear England, where one wanted to shake hands with the very dockmen and policemen after a sojourn in France. Even the Hampshire accent of the Southampton natives was not unpleasing after broad, boorish Breton.

At Waterloo Althea breakfasted on the hay tea and sawdust bread made exclusively for the railway station "refreshment" contractors. Then she went to Victoria and took a ticket for Bury—or rather for the nearest town, for she found on inquiry that the railway did not touch Bury itself.

August shed its golden glory over the land. The fields basked in the sunlight ; the trees had lost their freshness and showed yellow in places. Here and there were cottages covered with deep purple clematis and late Gloire de Dijon roses. Althea dozed uneasily in her third-class carriage and heeded the landscape not at all.

August is the month when, if a man have a spot of earth with a wall around it, he does well to enter in and lock the gate ; a month when everyone who is anywhere pants to be somewhere else. Sussex appeared to be full of people engaged in this puss-in-the-corner game. The whole population of England was changing ; only, as everyone left his home and went to that of someone else, exchange was no robbery, and each place remained full.

The premier Duke of England, who owns most of the land and houses in and about Arundel, does not encourage newcomers ;

hence the region thereabouts is not too thickly populated to be charming. It is a noble country of great, rolling downs spattered with beech woods. In the Spring one may walk miles there and never be out of earshot of the skylarks. The blue air is drenched with their melody, and the plaintive cry of new-born lambs—that most pathetic of all sounds—ascends ceaselessly from the sheepfolds.

Bury is a hamlet whose beauty has no jarring note, except the one shop where most of the necessaries of life, and a few of its superfluities, are to be bought. The natives have not yet quite discarded the smock frock ; there are farmers who are proud of being farmers, and one or two are lucky enough to have daughters who don't play the piano.

The farmer at Kennerton was one of these happy ones. Althea reached his door on foot, as she could find no trap at the station.

She had flagged miserably on the way and looked plaintively at the cyclists who spun past her in the dust, bowed over their wheels as if bent on developing a curvature as soon as possible.

The old house showed a cool, northern face to the road. There, to be sure, were the thatch and the ivy of which the lady on the boat had spoken. The quiet beauty and look of home which it wore brought a gush of tears to the homeless one's eyes. By the time the farmer's daughter came to the door Althea was half-swooning with fatigue and emotion.

Miss Burt gave her one look, and liked her.

"Come in, ma'am, and rest. You had to walk, and in this heat! What a shame! Give me your bag," and she opened the door hospitably wide.

"I am very tired," said Althea, keeping back the tears.

"Hungry, too, no doubt," said Miss Burt. "Perhaps you'd like something to eat before you try to talk. This room is empty. Sit down."

They were in a low-ceiled room with a great whitewashed oak beam across it. The window was long and low, and lattice-paned. On the deep sill were jars of red roses.

"I've come from France—last night. I am very tired, and hungry too, I think. I want to take rooms here if you have any vacant," Althea explained.

"We've just lost a lodger this morning. But I'll speak to mother, and meanwhile I'll bring you something. Perhaps you'd like to wash, ma'am?"

After ablutions in a quaint, uneven-floored room upstairs, hung with pure white dimity, Althea descended to find cold beef, salad, a fruit tart and a jug of cream set out on the table in the sitting-room.

While she ate, the kind young woman

talked things over with her mother, and the bargain was soon made.

Althea became a lodger at Kennerton Farm.

## CHAPTER XVII

### A HEART'S DESIRE

BENEATH the shelter of the old box trees, with the humming of the bees about her and the scents and sounds of late Summer stealing in on her senses, Althea sat for many mornings. Her life passed before her like a dream—as, at the last, it will do for all of us, we may be sure—"a tale that is told." The vision brought a sense of finality to her. How easy, leaning back in her low, lounging chair, her head softly pillowed, her tired eyes closed, to slip out of life; to give up forever the ferment, the striving, the bitterness—"the fever called living!"

Owing to her defective early training she had never had a grip on life in its broadest

sense—the life of strenuous endeavor, of altruistic impulse that prompts unselfish deeds. She had grown one-sided—running to emotion and not to action. Such a woman is born to suffer. Life is not loving and dreaming.

> The light of the whole world dies
> When love is done. . .

was true in the case of Althea. She had moral stamina enough to hate the wrong and love the right; enough even to refuse a half-love; but she was too weak to resist what seemed to be the current of fate.

She wondered ceaselessly what she was to do next, not realizing that our destiny stalks to meet us, and that there is no hole or corner of the earth which can hide us from its dread eye. And so it came to Althea in the old garden under the box-trees, amid the booming of the bees.

One morning as she sat there a step on

the path made her raise her eyes, and she saw before her Clarice Hilyer.

There was a moment of mutual astonished silence.

"What are you doing here?" exclaimed Althea.

Clarice's answer was ready. "I came in for a drink of water. I am stopping in the neighborhood."

Her voice was cool and steady, but her color ranged from red to pale.

Althea got up slowly. She was trembling. The two faced each other. It was no moment for convention—both felt that their naked souls were confronting each other. Althea burst out:

"Why did you ruin me? I never hurt you!"

Clarice stretched out her hand. "Sit down," she said, "you are very pale."

"How can I sit with you standing there?" answered Althea. She was ghastly,

and Mrs. Hilyer half-expected to see her fall.

"Let us both sit," she said: "I must talk to you."

She led the way down the box walk to an arbor at the end, cut out of the living shrubs. Mechanically Althea followed—she was good at following—and they sat down. They were so near that their gowns touched. Clarice was lovely, blooming with health, irradiating charm; Althea pale, broken, disordered, and breathing painfully. What man would not have preferred Clarice?—yet she looked at the other woman and knew the one man in the world who meant anything to her despised her as much as he honored Althea.

"Listen!" she said. "You hate me, of course; you say I ruined you, but I swear I didn't mean to. I yielded to an impulse—an unworthy one—and then the trouble was done. I did not want to hurt you."

"Since you did hurt me it is all the same," said Althea. "I would not harm a woman—a poor, wretched creature who is born to suffer because she *is* a woman—no, not for all the world could give me—not to obtain my heart's desire."

"Your heart's desire!" said the other. "Who ever gets that? I wonder what yours is?"

"I don't mind telling you," said Althea. "My heart's desire is to die here, quietly, as I sit, and be done with it all."

Clarice looked at her curiously.

"If I felt like that I should kill myself," she said.

"Ah, I have not your courage. You who could stab another woman in the dark could no doubt be brave enough to put yourself out of the world!"

Clarice was perfectly controlled.

"No wonder you are bitter!" she said. "You have a right to be, but I assure you

again that I acted without thought. One thing I have done—I have not mentioned your name since then except with respect. I have killed any scandal I have heard. That much I've done for you."

"You are very kind," said Althea. "I wonder why you have done it."

A sudden rage for frankness took possession of Clarice—such a gust of impulse as shakes the most secretive of women at least once in a lifetime. She turned full on Althea.

"Because Moorlake asked me to protect you!" she said, deliberately.

Althea winced. "Moorlake!" she said.

"Yes; he came to me and—and—" Clarice colored and her eyes hardened at the recollection—"asked me—commanded me in his masterful way to stamp out the scandal."

"It was like him," said Althea, and her face became like that of the devotee before the shrine of his patron saint.

Clarice saw the look and bit her lip.

"He loves you!" she exclaimed.

Althea kept silence.

"He is coming here to-night—at least to Lord Parham's where I'm stopping," Clarice said.

Then indeed Althea's calm broke.

She half-rose, then sank back on the bench.

"Here!" she cried; "so near!"

"I shall see him to-night," said the other.

"Will you do me one favor—the first—the last—I shall ever ask of you?" panted Althea. "Do *not* tell him that I am here!"

After all, Clarice was not a devil, though a jealous woman is first cousin to one. The utter prostration, physical and mental, pictured on her rival's face struck at her remnant of a heart.

"Is it possible," she said, "that you *wish* not to see him? to remain in hiding?"

"Oh, yes; I must not, *will* not see him!"

cried Althea. "I have left the Vincents and tried to lose myself here. Do, for God's sake, help me! You have no reason to hate me; we are not rivals at all; Moorlake is above and beyond us both; he is not for either you or me. Only let me be quiet; perhaps I shall not trouble anyone long."

Clarice Hilyer was silent for a moment. Then she turned and laid her hand on Althea's knee.

"I am a wicked woman," she said, "and my cursed selfishness has ruined you; but I want you to believe that I will help you if I can. But I want you to tell me one thing. You are free now; if Clement Moorlake should ask you to marry him, could you say no?"

Enemy as she had been, there was now so much pity and good faith in Clarice's face that Althea could not choose but answer. Her pride in Clement's chivalry would not let her be silent. It was a small triumph,

perhaps, but it was the only spot of light in her dark life—the only hour when she might prove herself a woman among a thousand. She fixed her eyes on Clarice's face.

"I have already refused him," she said.

Mrs. Hilyer sank back with a blank look.

"Mad woman!" she cried. "Refused Clement Moorlake! Why? *why?*"

"We are telling each other the truth to-day," said Althea. "I have not much pride left; I refused him because I knew he loved another woman."

"*That* is his secret! Ah, I thought so. That explains everything. Yet he would have married you?"

"Yes, he would have married me."

Clarice hid her face in her hands, then she raised it, and her eyes were wet and shining.

"*That*," she said, her voice thrilling, "is love. I have seen it to-day for the first time. All my life I have known things that

called themselves love—self-seeking, desire, passion, vanity, coquetry—but never the real thing. I have seen men who, when they had got what they wanted, rode away; women who added one conquest to another, so that they might count them like beads on a devil's rosary! But to-day I have found love. And it is too high for me."

There was a great stillness. A hard woman had been brushed by the shining wing of her guardian angel, and her heart was purified by the touch.

Presently she stretched out her hand to Althea.

"Tell me," she said, "what will you do? Have you money?"

"Enough."

"You are all alone, aren't you? Oh, I wish I could help you!"

"You can—by keeping my secret, I demand it. I have the right."

"Yes, you have the right. I will keep it."

Clarice stooped and kissed the thin hand. "Mrs. North, will you forgive me?" she asked.

"I would not hurt a hair of your head," said Althea.

Clarice rose. "I honor you, I respect you, and I will serve you whenever and however you choose."

And so they parted.

Althea knew that the time had come when she must again be moving. She must leave this green spot of earth and in the gray wilderness of London streets seek an inviolable hiding-place.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A VAIN SEARCH

THE moon—a huge orange-colored August moon—flooded the old Tudor house and its surrounding park.

Lord Parham's guests had strayed out of doors after dinner, wooed by the gorgeous night. Some were walking in the Italian garden among quaint, clipped yews, pergolas and the slim white statues and urns that peeped forth from masses of late climbing roses. Others passed through the little gate that led to the wild part of the park. Among those were Moorlake and Clarice Hilyer.

He had discovered, with a shock of violent distaste, that she was one of the house party,

and had resolved to leave next day. He had spent the past week in unavailing search for Althea, and felt unfit enough for visiting; nothing but the strongest necessity would have forced him to fulfil his engagement with the Parhams. He had conscientious scruples against breaking a promise if he could possibly keep it, and so found himself, weary and out of spirits, near the woman whom of all the world he disliked the most.

Her behavior had been perfect; though she sat beside him at dinner she talked for the most part with the man on the other side, who soon came under her charm.

Afterward, on the brow of the hill that overlooked the lower park, covered with gnarled old oaks and tall bracken, the two met again, quite by accident.

Clarice felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to tell him that within an hour's drive he could find the object of his search, for she was sure that he was seeking Althea.

She conceived him to be urged only by a consuming desire to right the woman whom she had wronged; but what she did not know was that he was not alone prompted by honor—that something a thousand times warmer, and not less noble, was making every day's delay a year of torment to him.

Should she break her bad promise and betray the hiding-place? Should she make Moorlake and Althea a present of each other? The eager questioning within her kept her tensely silent as she stood in the moonshine looking over the enchanted valley. It was Clement who spoke first; they had not met since the unforgotten interview in Chelsea.

"What a pity no one can paint a moonlight scene," he observed.

"Many people think they can," said Clarice. "Do you know you have one fault?" she added.

"Only one?" said Clement, stiffly. "What has that to do with moonlight?"

"Nothing at all. But I could not help making the observation."

"You are always very frank with me. May I not hear what my fault is?"

"You have heard it before—intense conventionality. Just look at this situation. A wild park, bathed in moonlight. In the background a fine old Tudor mansion. On one side in the distance a herd of deer, two of them white and spectral in the moonlight. An old church on the other side. In the foreground an extremely handsome man with a face like a Lancelot turned Galahad; a not unprepossessing woman with bare shoulders and a pink chiffon gown. The man hates the woman and the woman fears the man. They are at swords' points. And at this supreme moment Sir Lancelot-Galahad makes a remark about moonlight!"

"That is an interesting picture—very," said Moorlake. "There are only one or two flaws in the description; for instance,

'the woman fears the man'—I don't recognize the truth of that."

"Don't you? And yet you have great penetration."

"You have no reason to like me, but I can't imagine how you can fear me. If I had the power to injure you, you know quite well that I would not do it."

"I believe that, but one fears what one admires. You know parsons preach about *fearing* God. I once asked my mother what that meant, and she said, 'fearing to offend Him.' Do you see?"

"I think you have quite atoned for your former strictures by comparing me to the Deity.

He smiled a little.

"It is blasphemous, isn't it?—but I don't mean badly. You have for me the aloofness and indifference of a god."

His smile grew more indulgent.

"Don't be foolish!" he said. "A god!

—a poor, perplexed, faulty fool of a man, who doesn't know what to do next!"

He took a turn up and down the brow of the slope. She followed him with a sudden impulse.

"I think I can help you," she said.

He stood and looked down at her, paying an unwilling tribute to her prettiness and charm.

"I'm almost sure you can't," he said.

"Are you trying to find somebody?"

"Why do you ask that?

"Only because I want to know."

"I *am* trying to find someone. I wish it more than anything else on earth." He was very serious now.

"Have you searched all through the neighborhood?—at Bury, for instance?"

"Why do you ask that? What do you mean?" There was no disguising his eagerness. His eyes were shining.

Clarice smiled provokingly.

"I don't mean much! I'm cold. Shall we go back?"

"Listen!" he said. "You owe me something; you must tell me! Do you know? Have you seen—the person?"

"I went to Kennerton Farm this morning and drank a glass of water," she said.

She turned and walked slowly before him toward the house. He followed in a fever of impatience.

"Mrs. Hilyer! I ask you—I beg you—to tell me what you mean. Do I humble myself enough? Won't you tell me?"

She turned on him suddenly.

"No," she said, "not enough. You shall first tell me one thing: Do you love Mrs. North?"

He flushed deeply.

"You have no right to ask me that. It is an intrusion," he exclaimed, his nostrils quivering and the old haughty look on his face.

"Perhaps you are right," said Clarice. "Forgive me—" and she walked on. She had never seen him so eager. It stabbed her to think that another woman was the cause of his unusual emotion. He still followed her, stifling his pride.

"Mrs. Hilyer," he said, as they paused at the gate, "there is, after all, no reason why I should not tell you. I love Althea North with all my heart and soul, and if I do not find her it will be the greatest sorrow of my life."

Clarice's face paled and contracted.

"Is it so serious?" she asked, in a low voice. "You really mean it? She is the happy woman?"

"It is very serious," he answered, "and she is the woman whom I shall try to make happy, if she will let me."

With a perceptible effort Clarice threw off her emotion.

"I can only tell you," she said, half-mock-

ingly, "that the water at Kennerton Farm is very good. It will quench your thirst!" and she left him standing by the gate.

In the early morning he hurried away once more to seek Althea; and once more he was too late. She had left the farm.

## CHAPTER XIX

### IN THE SHADOW

A SMALL room over a baker's shop in Highbury was the next refuge.

Again mere chance had dictated choice. When Althea arrived in London she yielded to an impulse to drive through Chelsea, while she tried to decide on her next move. As the luggage-laden four-wheeler jogged along the King's Road, she prayed for a sign. Just before she came to the Vestry Hall, a blue Highbury 'bus clattered by. It brought a sudden inspiration. Why not Highbury! It was remote, unfashionable—a perfect hiding-place. What she should do when settled in this deadly suburb she did not ask herself; she had become superstitious enough to take anything for a sign, and she at once bargained with her cabman to drive

her to Highbury. It was an almost unwarrantable extravagance, for her stock of money was alarmingly low ; but she dared not have her boxes sent after her, as they would afford a clue to her seeking friends.

It was not easy to find a lodging, but after a weary search Althea was at last able to install herself in the room over the bakery. The landlady regarded her with suspicion ; nobody like that had ever before applied for a lodging. The amount of luggage, however, combined with a fortnight's rent in advance, overcame Mrs. Rose's scruples, and Althea took possession.

She could not improve the appearance of the room much, for with characteristic meanness Oliver North had ordered all her ornaments to be packed away where she could not gain access to them. She had only two treasures, and these she kept under lock and key. One was Violet's first shoe, the other a portrait of Clement which she had cut out

of an illustrated weekly the year before, after her first meeting with him. It was so like that she dared not look at it now ; but the little shoe she sometimes put under her pillow when she could not sleep. It seemed a talisman with power to calm and soothe. It is a characteristic of mother-love that it survives everything else. The child whom we have brought forth with unspeakable agony and inexpressible joy is inalienably ours. Man's love is selfish and transient ; it may pass—nay, it surely will, for love between man and woman does not appear to have been created to stand the test of time ; but nothing can take from a woman the unmixed rapture of her child's early years. No matter what the future may have in store—and life's one great certainty is suffering—there must always remain the memory of the little head that nestled in the mother's bosom, the little face that found for a time its God and its heaven in the mother's eyes.

August in London has none of the charm of August in Sussex. The heat, the dust, the dull roll of the 'buses, the sharp clatter of the carts, the poor food, the dingy surroundings, the absence of occupation and diversion—all these made up a daily life that sapped such strength and hope as remained to Althea.

She failed to realize how unhappy she had made Nellie and Bertie, and even Moorlake. Every day in the "agony column" of the *Times* appeared a poignant appeal to her to return. It was so worded that she alone would have recognized it—but she never saw the *Times*.

She forced herself to walk a little each day, resting sometimes on a bench in the little park near her lodging. For hours she would sit at the open windows of her room watching the 'buses go by. Their clatter seemed to say: "We can take you to Clement! We can take you to Clement!" For

a few pence she could have gone to Chelsea. One day the desire became too strong; she hailed a blue 'bus—had her foot on the step, and then, as the horses started, withdrew it, almost falling to the gutter. The conductor exclaimed angrily, but she did not heed—once more she had conquered.

In September she went to the city and saw her solicitor. He gave her the money she needed—more than usual, for he had contrived to squeeze something out of North—and told her that Moorlake and the Vincents had come to him more than once to inquire if he had seen her.

"You must at least let me assure them that you are safe and well," he said, thinking, as he looked at her, that her days were numbered.

"You may do that, if you like," she said, listlessly. "But you must keep my secret. I will never go back while there is a chance of meeting Mr. Moorlake."

Then she spoke of Violet and asked what

prospect there was of her ever seeing the child again, but he could give her little comfort.

When they parted he said: "Forgive me for saying it, but you are in the wrong."

"Perhaps I am," she assented, dully, but I can't do otherwise."

"You should see Mr. Moorlake once more, at least," he urged.

She shook her head sadly.

"I prefer the guillotine to Chinese torture," she said, and so left him.

Physically she was near the end of her tether. One day in October it did not seem worth while to get up. It was a dull, lowering day with a foretaste of Winter fog in the air. The reek of chimneys mingled with the pleasant smell of fresh bread coming from the bakery below. Althea lay in the narrow iron bed with its coarse sheets, gray with the London blight, and stared at the little room. In the window was a rickety

dressing table, the mirror of which had to be coaxed with a wad of paper to remain at a useful angle. There was a band of brassy metal across the top of the lower window sash, holding a short Nottingham lace curtain that had also the dim bloom of soot upon it. There were a chest of drawers, two chairs, a washstand furnished with odd pieces of china and with two flabby gray towels on the rail ; the paper was a washable " sanitary " one with a maddening pattern in dull brown ; the carpet was worn, faded and grimed to an even, despondent tone.

" What a room to die in ! " thought Althea, for she hoped that her intense lassitude might foretell dissolution. She remembered the white enameled wood and pale blue chintz of her bedroom in Pont street, and the irony of life in general and hers in particular made her smile bitterly.

Mrs. Rose bustled in with the breakfast. Several weeks of prompt payment and un-

impeachable respectability of conduct had softened her commercial heart.

"Well, I'm sure," she exclaimed, setting down the tray on a chair, "you don't look up to much this morning!"

"No, I'm not," said Althea. "I think I shall stay in bed a little while."

"Why should you get up? Your life isn't so busy, is it? Not much to stir you up like, is there?" responded Mrs. Rose. "I always wonder how you do get through the days."

Althea began pouring out the tea, which was always fresh and good. As she turned, a little shoe fell out from under the pillow.

Mrs. Rose's face kindled with interest.

"Oh, the dear little shoe!" she exclaimed, picking it up. "Did that belong to a child of yours, ma'am?"

A sudden flush surged over Althea's face and weak tears trickled from her lashes.

"There, there!" said the landlady, "I

didn't ought to 'a' been so sudden ! Perhaps the poor little darling's in heaven."

Althea lost all her self-control ; all the silence, privation, repression of the past two months rolled up and crushed her. A tidal wave of emotion seemed rearing its crest and tumbling nearer and nearer till it broke over her and, breaking, blotted out the world. By night she was delirious.

Such a thing had never before occurred in Mrs. Rose's household since she had let lodgings. She was extremely embarrassed, and no less sympathetic. She turned for advice to Mr. Rose, whom she was not apt to honor in that way. He was a slow man, and took time to consider. Next morning, after his wife had had a sleepless night, watching in Althea's room, he mildly suggested a doctor.

The medical man, when he came, pronounced the patient very ill, and asked if she had any friends or relatives. Then again

the Roses were nonplussed. What clue was there for them to go by? A baby's shoe afforded no useful evidence. But as Althea grew worse the doctor became more urgent. He pressed Mrs. Rose to examine all Mrs. North's belongings in search of information.

"Which I feels like a thief," observed the landlady, as, within sound of the patient's ravings, she turned over the contents of the boxes.

There was nothing to assist her. Only one small box, which was locked, looked hopeful.

"But I can't hardly break it open," said the reluctant Mrs. Rose.

"I can—and will," said the doctor, who had the worst possible opinion of Althea's condition.

When the lid of the box flew open it disclosed only the newspaper portrait of Clement Moorlake, with the name beneath.

"Well, I never!" said Mrs. Rose. "The poor thing's husband, I suppose."

But the doctor was a man who knew a thing or two, though he did live in Highbury. He had heard of Moorlake. He went and consulted the Red Book, discovered where the sculptor lived, and then wrote him a note.

Next day Althea's fever abated, but her weakness was pitiable. Pulse there was next to none; the overtaxed nerves, the impoverished blood, were taking their revenge. She was conscious, but was too far gone to show that she was. Toward afternoon she felt a soft hand on her forehead and smelt a delicate fragrance like that of fresh violets—an odor that contended triumphantly with the bread and the soot. She did not want to know who it was—it might be her long-dead mother come to welcome her into the other world.

The hand came and went, but the violets

stayed. Once or twice she heard a voice—very far off, but very familiar. She could not connect it with any person she had known, yet its tones brought a curious, vague comfort that curled round her scarce beating heart and warmed it. Then she began to understand : she was dead, and the kind spirits who had carried her away were letting her rest and gain strength before entering on the new life. She liked being dead. She felt warm and clean and comfortable ; only, of course, being dead, she could not move at all, just at first. One of the spirits fed her very often, and if she had been alive, she would have said that she swallowed beef tea sometimes and sometimes brandy, but she supposed that must be a delusion, because the dead do not eat.

Then there came a day when somebody kindly took the weights off her eyes. The lids quivered and opened a little. It was morning, and a little light struggled in. A

form wonderfully like an earthly woman, in a white cap and apron, stood by the bed.

"She is sensible," murmured the woman.

A deep breath was drawn by someone else near by. Althea searched for her voice, so long unused that she seemed to have mislaid it.

"Not dead?" she said, so softly it was a wonder anybody heard it.

But the white-capped person bent over her and the voice of someone else said, very low: "Thank God!"

Then Althea's eyes opened wider, and she saw Nellie.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE GOAL OF HAPPINESS

CAMPDEN HILL once more—love, friendship, security, home! Slowly Althea struggled back to life; slowly, yet with a sweetness, a serenity that she had not known before.

For she had looked life and death in the face and had learned her lesson, the truth the world holds for everyone of us, that we can none of us be perfectly happy, but that we can all be brave and patient.

No hint of Clement's new-born love had come to her. Nellie was pledged to silence—indeed, absolute reticence was enforced by Althea, who would not hear Clement's name.

But the time came at last when the secret was to be made manifest.

One afternoon in December Althea sat in the morning-room, which seemed inexpressibly restful and beautiful after the Highbury lodging. She was still pale and thin, but not white and wasted as she had been two months before. It was pleasant to sit looking into the fire, thinking about nothing. She had learned how to do that, and found it a wholesome accomplishment. When ugly, wearing thoughts put up their heads she promptly extinguished them. To-day she was all peace. Nellie had left her for half an hour, but presently she returned and began to make tea. She was far from calm, and clattered about among the tea-things in an unusual manner.

"Where have you been, Nellie?" asked her friend. "I'm like a baby without its nurse when you leave the room."

"I had a caller," answered Nellie.

"A woman or a man?"

"A man."

"Someone you like?"

"Yes; and it's lucky I do like him, as he has been here in the last two months just fifty times."

"Good gracious! He must be in love with you."

"Not with *me*."

Something in the tone made Althea turn in her deep chair and look at Mrs. Vincent.

"Nellie . . ." she began.

"It's no use," broke out Nellie; "you've *got* to see him!"

Althea half-rose. "If you begin that . . ." she said.

Nellie was almost stern. She left the tea table, came over to Althea, and stood with her hand gently pressing her back into her chair.

"Althea," she said, gravely, "you are strong enough now to hear what Clement has to say. It is unfair to him to refuse. He is the loyalest, finest creature I've ever known.

Any woman would die for him gladly if she loved him, and even if you don't you have no right to deny him a hearing."

"If I don't!" said Althea, slowly. She was looking up into Nellie's eyes, but she covered her face after a moment with her thin hand. "I thought you understood," she said, with something of the old weakness.

"I thought so, too, dear," said Nellie. "But everything is changed. He has come here nearly every day, hoping and praying to see you—to tell you. . . . He is here now."

Althea made a movement as if to escape, but all at once Moorlake was in the room—was beside her—near, near, with both her hands in his, and Nellie was gone.

"Forgive me," he said, softly; "I could not wait another minute."

He was half-kneeling beside her, still holding her hands. Of all she had had to bear

this was the strangest, the sweetest, the bitterest, for it was like life and death together. All the sorrow, the joy, the mystery and the fulness of a whole existence were in that moment, in that touch. In an instant her blood leaped and her heart bounded. For something in Clement was changed—something had gone, and something was come in its place. His old look she knew, but not this. On that face which she had loved better than happiness she had seen pity, kindness, affection ; but now, unless her senses were fatally mistaken, here was love—a love such as few women ever win and fewer still contrive to keep. His clasp sent fresh, full life through her veins. She did not know the meaning of it all, and so she only sat still, finding it joy enough to feel, without knowing.

" My dear, my dear," he said, " may I tell you now? Are you strong? Can you listen? "

She only smiled assent—such a strange smile, like that of one who sees the heavens open, but knows not if the revelation be for him or another.

"Oh, Althea! how I have searched for you! and how I have loved you!"

"Loved me?" she said, softly.

"Yes; loved," he answered, vehemently, "as I never knew I could love."

"I can't believe—I dare not." She gently drew her hand away.

"You send me away?" he cried.

"No—no! Stay—but tell me—make me understand."

And then he told her everything—of his love, his long misplaced loyalty, his sudden disillusion. In that ardent, hurried story lay the recompense for all she had suffered. When it was over, he knelt once more beside her and asked her for an answer.

"Do you love me?" he said, "did you ever love me?"

But there are truths that need no telling. Here at last she was in his arms, not pitied, but loved. It was more than she could bear. Her head drooped—her eyes closed —closed, as he feared, forever. But the weakness passed.

FINIS.

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
A 000 040 674 4